REWRITING PLACE: APPALACHIA BEYOND THE STEREOTYPE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that Appalachian writers can reappropriate and rewrite the stereotypes that have come to stand in for realistic representations of the various cultures and populations living within the region. It examines how literature by Appalachian authors can be viewed as undermining the stereotypes about this region. It also contains a collection of short stories set in West Virginia and presented as another facet of the work that Appalachian writers do to reinvent the region in popular imagination.

When a people or region is represented as containing a homogenous culture, the diverse populations that do not fit into the stereotyped version of place are erased from the cultural landscape. This text critically interrogates the practice of erasure that happens when a region is presented as containing a homogenous culture. In contrast to popular cultural representations of the place, which often rely upon stereotypes, literary works by Appalachian writers effect a more nuanced and complex picture of the region. The text examines the genesis and evolution of Appalachian stereotypes through the figure of the hillbilly, which has come to serve as an emblem for the region's population and devolved culture. Through examining literature by Breece D'J Pancake and Scott McClanahan, this dissertation shows how two West Virginia writers have reappropriated Appalachian stereotypes, offering a deeper understanding of how the population has suffered from long-term industrial exploitation of the region and how the people exist beyond the hillbilly stereotype.

The short stories serve as my contribution to this work of rewriting a stereotyped region. The stories, which take place in and around the fictional town of Brickton, West Virginia, attempt to undermine stereotyped representations of Appalachia. These stories reveal the social and historical contexts out of which various stereotypes have emerged and simultaneously portray the rich diversity of Appalachian life that its stereotypes elide.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Susanne Marie Morris and Harry Ronald Morris, who may not always understand what I do or why but always support me in my endeavors.

This project is also dedicated to the people of Appalachia who are tired of being viewed as hillbillies and rednecks. I hope my stories help to lessen that stigma and allow all of us be recognized for the multifaceted people that we are.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: INBRED AND IGNORANT: MOVING BEYOND STEREOTYPES IN WEST VIRGINIA LITERATURE

The people of Appalachia have had their fair share of stereotypes heaped upon them: redneck, hillbilly, cracker, moonshiner, mountain man, religious fanatic, and racist. The people are ignorant, lazy, animalistic, violent, carnal, inbred, and toothless. Sarah Baird questions the continued stereotype that Appalachia is a homogenous region of people who are "poor, backward, and white," pointing out that the region has had a diverse ethnic makeup since the nineteenth century. Still, because of lingering stereotypes, many do not see this diversity. In an online faculty discussion board post at the University of North Georgia, a school within the confines of Appalachia, a faculty member, referring to a student not wearing shoes, writes that because the student disrespected the community enough to "(un)dress like a hillbilly," said student should be prepared to be "dismissed as one…in the preference of someone more attuned to proper decorum and respectful behavior." As Scott Jaschik notes, "faculty members who would be careful to consider whether their comments might offend many groups do not feel the same need to be sensitive to those from poor, largely white, rural communities in Appalachia." These examples do not come from some unenlightened past – they are from current news reports about Appalachia being simplified into stereotype rather than being viewed as a vast geographic region with a complex culture. In much of the popular imagination, there is no distinction between stereotypes and reality when referring to

Appalachia. In many cases, people outside of Appalachia "see little or no difference between the 'real' southern mountaineers and their cultural [stereotyped] image" (Harkins 4).

When a people or region is represented as containing a homogenous culture, the diverse populations that do not fit into the stereotyped version of place are erased from the cultural landscape. This introduction critically interrogates this practice of erasure. In contrast to popular cultural representations of the place, which often rely upon stereotypes, literary works by Appalachian writers effect a more nuanced and complex picture of the region. In the following pages, I examine the genesis and evolution of Appalachian stereotypes through the figure of the hillbilly, which has come to serve as an emblem for the region's population and devolved culture. Specifically, I explore how local-color writing, a subgenre of late-nineteenth century regionalism, and industrial exploitation have helped give rise to the figure of the hillbilly and other denigrated portrayals of Appalachia. I then examine the work of Breece D'J Pancake and Scott McClanahan to show how two West Virginia writers have attempted to reappropriate Appalachian stereotypes. Pancake's 1983 collection, *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, and McClanahan's 2013 book, *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place*, offer a multifaceted understanding of how the population has suffered from long-term industrial exploitation of the region and how the people exist beyond the hillbilly stereotype. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of my own creative work and how, like Pancake and McClanahan, I too challenge these stereotyped representations of Appalachia and West Virginia in particular.

Contemporary incarnations of regionalism offer tools to respond to and counteract Appalachian stereotypes. Viewed through the lens of Douglas Reichert Powell's critical regionalism, Pancake's and McClanahan's texts can be read as both responses to stereotyped representations of Appalachia and its people and activist work in re-envisioning the region through different cultural markers. While Pancake never hints that he knows the stereotypes to which he responds, he imparts a complexity to every part of the West Virginian's life, creating a portrait of the people and culture which is more complex than stereotypes allow. McClanahan, on the other hand, responds directly to stereotypes about the region, denying that they are the simple constructs brought about by the practices of the people they represent. Instead, McClanahan insists that stereotypes have been created by a history of exploitation and its resultant poverty and hopelessness. By examining these texts as practices of critical regionalism, these two authors can be viewed as creating richer representations of place in order to help readers "see local problems and priorities enmeshed in broader patterns" (Powell).

As part of my understanding of literature's role in critiquing Appalachian stereotypes, I rely upon Stuart Hall's thinking about stereotypes. Hall defines the stereotype as an exaggerated and simplified representation that creates artificial boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. At the same time, stereotypes create and perpetuate power imbalances. Hall describes stereotypes as reducing "people to a few, simple essential characteristics which are represented as fixed by nature" (257). Stereotypes are often presented in binaries, us versus them, and these representations allow for even more oversimplifications and false dichotomies between what is and what

is not acceptable, what is good and what is bad (Hall 230). In contrast to popular cultural representations of the place, which often rely upon stereotypes, literary works by Appalachian writers represent the region and its population as multifaceted. Even as we heed Stuart Hall's caution that the very victims of stereotypes, including Appalachian writers, "can be trapped by the stereotype, unconsciously confirming it by the very terms in which they try to oppose and resist it," these writers nonetheless are able to create new versions of the region and its inhabitants through their words (263). Though they may be victims who perpetuate these stereotypes, they can also write their way out of them, offering more complex versions of the stereotypes. These writers may not break down the stereotypes completely, but they can offer heterogeneous portraits of the people and place.

If West Virginia is viewed as a land full of hillbillies, then these writers build a more nuanced vision of the place, and instances of more complex representations abound. The poverty is no longer benign; it causes desperation. The hillbillies may drink too much, but they must also face the consequences of their alcohol abuse. The violence does not come in the form of feuds but as violence against women, as desperate men who have lost all power in other parts of their lives strike out at the only people they can control. Some women may be sexless, but there are long and varied stories behind how these women have become this way. Others may be over-sexed, but they lack choices. If stereotypes are flat and generic, if they reduce people to "a few, simplified characteristics," meant to denigrate large groups, then revisionist Appalachian fiction undermines them through its rendering of a diverse people and place (Hall 257).

The Hillbilly, Stereotypes, and Authenticity

Stereotypes of West Virginia and Appalachia spring from the idea that the region is backward, isolated, and out of touch with the evolution of the rest of the United States, and the hillbilly has become an archetypical figure in representing this version of Appalachia. Historically, the term first arose in print in a 1900 article in the *New York Journal*: "a Hill-Billie is a free and untrammeled white citizen of Alabama, who lives in the hills, has no means to speak of, dresses as he can, talks as he pleases, drinks whiskey when he gets it, and fires off his revolver as the fancy takes him" (Hawthorne qtd. in Harkins 49). Since then, the definition has evolved, but much of the sentiment remains the same. Numerous scholars have offered their understanding of the term, as the hillbilly continues to be a figure in the national imagination. For John Howe, the hillbilly "represents the impulsive and instinctive reactions of the completely natural man, unfettered by civilizing influence" (152). Carissa Massey writes that the hillbilly "is lazy, ignorant, and drunk, an unproductive figure who does nothing to elevate himself" (130). Anthony Harkins adds that hillbillies are "lazy, slovenly, degenerate people who endure wrenching but always comic poverty, embody an uncivilized state of raw physicality and sexuality, and possess an almost superhuman fecundity" (19). Because the hillbilly does not fit within acceptable parameters of difference, he is excluded from the national story of a homogenous, forward-thinking population. Instead, he is part of an entire culture that is devolved, an outlier of what it means to be American.

The female hillbilly exists as both a counterpart to the characterization of the male hillbilly and as a caricature in her own right. She is either over-sexed or sex-less,

depending on the woman's age and whether she has given birth. Young mountain women are oversexed and simple, while older mountain women have been run down by the lives they have lived. Harkins offers several different types of female hillbillies. There is "the beautiful but ignorant mountain lass; the over-worked and crudely attired drudge who struggles to care for her oversized family; or…the bonneted, toothless crone who lives out her remaining years smoking a corncob pipe awash in a haze of melancholia" (32-33). According to Massey, the female hillbilly must complement the male hillbilly. If he is "lazy, ignorant, and drunk then the hillbilly woman is aggressive, overly fecund, and masculine" (130). Of course, these representations of mountain women serve as more than just partners to the hillbilly man. In early twentieth century silent films, these "portrayals of manly gun-toting women and wild mountain girls" served as "warnings of the dangers of crossing social and gender boundaries at a time when the more socially liberated 'new woman,' suffragettes, and the ever-growing number of women working outside the home, were challenging traditional gender mores and male control of public spaces" (Harkins 59). At the same time, because these hillbilly women could not keep up with the pressures to fit the mold of American female beauty, they were "consistently represented as 'trash,' typed as obese, or desexualized altogether" (Massey 128). Young or old, overly sexed or sexless, like the male hillbilly, the female is separate from other women in the US. She is an outsider, inherently othered by dominant images of womanhood, and used as a cautionary tale to other women.

Though the term hillbilly was first used in the early days of the twentieth century, the advent of this figure has roots in nineteenth century local-color writing, a subgenre of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century regionalist movement. During a time of American industrial advancement, when the country was becoming an urban nation rather than an amalgamation of small, separate, rural communities, the goal of regionalism was to move from art forms that still mirrored the concerns of England to arts that were distinctly American (Barrish 2; Jordan ix). Early regionalism focused on "detailed depictions of unique American environments and the communities that inhabited them" (Jordan ix). William Dean Howells, an early proponent of regionalism, saw the movement as "democracy in literature," but it has also been accused of serving as a form of "literary tourism" that helps to perpetuate stereotypes (Barrish 75). While one goal of early twentieth century regionalism was to serve as an "antidote or response to the forces of consumerism and standardization," in recent years there has been growing concern over the negative effects regionalism had on some communities (Katz and Mahoney xviii). Regionalist literature depicted regional differences, but at the same time, it also portrayed a homogenized America, one that was exclusionary, sexist, xenophobic, racist, and classist (Barrish 90-94). Though regionalism was viewed as creating a democratic literature that encompassed all of America, this was only insofar as the differences portrayed in the literature "fit…within certain boundaries of perceived otherness" (Barrish 79). While regional differences were accepted and expected, these differences had to exist within the idea of what constituted an acceptable America.

Appalachia does not fit into the parameters of acceptable regional difference, its people and cultures existing outside of the norms of what is expected of America. Instead, Appalachia has been seen as the problem region of an otherwise homogenous nation, a stigma that has never completely disappeared. From drawling regional dialects to pride in working class culture, this region epitomizes a lack of technological advancement and an absence of urban centers of cultural activity. Viewed as moving in the opposite direction from the rest of the country, Appalachia is a region that does not fit in with America's movement toward a technologically advanced, cosmopolitan society.

Local-color writing serves as a point of origin for many of the stereotypes that continue to plague Appalachia, including the figure of the hillbilly. The genre usually portrays places "outside the mainstream, at a distance from national centers of financial, political, or cultural power," and Appalachian literature sits firmly within this genre (Barrish 74). Local-color writing "attempts to convey the essence of that locale through detailed depictions of the geographic setting and through characters that supposedly represent essential qualities of the place. Plots are simple…. and the characters display exaggerated regional traits, often to the point of stereotype" (Algeo 30). The hillbilly figure begins to emerge through these characterizations. While local-color writing covers many different areas of the country, in Appalachia, it began to "define the region in popular imagination" (Algeo 30). Because many writers of this genre were outsiders to the region, they imitated the tropes they saw in their peers' prose rather than

investigating the area themselves and were largely responsible for creating many Appalachian stereotypes that continue to this day (Algeo 31).

Among the local-color writers portraying this region, Mary Noailles Murfree, who wrote under the name Charles Egbert Craddock, and John Fox, Jr., both nineteenth century writers, focused on the Appalachian region and were responsible for creating Southern Mountain Writing, a subgenre of local-color writing. Because Murfree did not always denigrate the mountain man, often a romanticizing the mountaineer and Appalachia, her writing did not perpetuate stereotypes of the hillbilly to the extent that Fox's fiction would (Roggenkamp 196; Walle 61). Though he was originally from Kentucky, Fox spent much of his life in New England, returning to Appalachia only as a coal speculator during a time when outside mining interests besieged the region. Because of his birthplace and adult return in an industrial role, Fox was viewed as having intimate knowledge of Appalachia. He would capitalize on this knowledge in his writing, focusing on the struggle between residents of Appalachia and industrial interests (Walle 62).

Fox is credited as the writer who "more than anyone else, inscribed the mythic image of the Kentucky mountaineer that endures to this day" (Blee and Billings 121). Fox's stories portrayed the mountain man in ways that would later fit into the stereotype of the hillbilly, describing these men as "derelicts slowly sinking into a mire of regression" and as a people who had "reverted to illiteracy, thriftlessness, and squalor… unable to compete when pitted against civilization" (Walle 61). In his 1901 essay, "The Southern Mountaineer," Fox lays out the stereotypes that would come into play in his

fiction. He calls the mountaineer "a distinct relic of Anglo-Saxon past" and claims "the mountain dweller lives apart from the world" (123, 122). Fox goes on to describe this mountaineer as having "no roads at all except the beds of streams," very few schools and churches, and the inability to read and write, among other negative traits (124). Fox offers Appalachian speech with a southern twang, full of grammatical errors, its content suspicious of the world outside Appalachia. He describes the hillbilly's home as a one-room cabin held together with mud and lacking windows (125). Everything about the mountain man and his home is rustic, backward, and devolved. Fox's work became wildly popular, and he was viewed as an expert on the mountain region and its inhabitants. Much of this stereotyped imagery "would be taken as objective, scientific narratives" of the place, causing it to be used in later representations of the region (Algeo 36). While Fox's representation of Appalachia and the mountain man was a fiction, his depictions, as well as those of others, would "appear all the more objective and factual as the traces of their construction activities fade[d]" (Blee and Billings 119). Local color writing's popularity eventually declined and scholars began to question the effects of early regionalism on the American landscape, but to this day, this genre has had a lasting influence on how Appalachia is viewed (Blee and Billings 120-121; Algeo 31).

Industrial exploitation is another point of origin for denigrated representations of Appalachia. At the turn of the twentieth century, as deforestation in many areas led to the movement from family owned farms to coalmine and cotton mill work, as well as an upswing in tenant farming, Appalachia's poverty made national headlines. When the

region's inhabitants fought the bad working conditions, including "low pay, poor living conditions, and particularly the widespread practice of employing children," they were met with public relations campaigns put forth by the very industrialists who created these conditions (Harkins 56). The campaigns were

> designed to illustrate the backward and unhealthy life ways of hill people and the supposed advantage of town life and to present [industrialists] as agents of benevolence. Building on the by-then well-established vision of hopelessly isolated and irrationally violent mountain people…these defenders of the textile industry added new layers to the conception of mountaineers, presenting them as diseased, illiterate, undernourished, sexually promiscuous, and degenerate people. The 'mountaineer' thus became both a useful foil for industrial exploitation and a potent symbol of unsanitary and immoral white poverty. (Harkins 56)

With this version of Appalachia becoming more hardwired into national memory, the stereotypes of Appalachia and its hillbilly inhabitants became dominant in popular opinion. By denigrating the entire region, industrialists were able to argue that they were offering a way of life that was more in tune with the national standard. By forcing the hillbillies out of the woods and into the factories, they were showing the degenerate man how to work. In moving to town, the hillbilly's child gained skills that would have been lost to him living on a farm or in the forest, even if these skills were industrial rather than educational. In other words, mining the mountains, removing the trees from the

hills, and requiring children to work in the mills improved pre-industrial Appalachian life.

This type of denigration is one function of the stereotype, as it is often used to put the "lower classes" in their place, allowing dominant groups to preserve their power. In Appalachia, this dominance often takes on the form of industrial exploitation. As mentioned previously, John Fox, Jr. was both a writer and a coal speculator. Because he had an economic agenda for the continued growth in mining, his written denigration of the people of Appalachia can be viewed as a strategy to preserve his own industrial and economic power. By working with industrial concerns and helping to perpetuate these working conditions, Fox helped to keep the people who worked in the mines impoverished, a process that continues today. In West Virginia, those with the greatest power are the same people who own the resources, mainly timber, coal, and natural gas. In a recent report, the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, a nonprofit think tank, found that the top ten private landowners in the state are all industrial entities. Significantly, many of these landowners are not physically present in the state. West Virginia's southern counties, where this absentee ownership is most prevalent, are places "where the highest poverty levels in the state happen to exist, along with all the health disparities and daunting economic challenges that come with them" (Board). This contemporary continuance of nineteenth century economic practices has helped to perpetuate both the hillbilly stereotype and the poverty that still exists. While industries today cannot use the same public relations campaigns they used in the nineteenth century, they have modern incarnations in the form of fear campaigns that portray

mining as the only industry possible in the region. The effects of these contemporary campaigns on the population are the same as they were in the nineteenth century – poverty and powerlessness.

In the case of West Virginia and much of Appalachia, industrial exploitation has taken on a level of power unseen in other areas of the country, helping to keep those who do not own land or resources out of power. This system creates conditions in which the people of Appalachia have very little control over their own lives or how they are represented. Because of continued public relations campaigns, these industrial concerns have led people to believe that they must rely on these industries for their wellbeing and that there are no other economic opportunities in the region. For instance, West Virginia Coal Association President Bill Raney blames political pressure to cut down on greenhouse gases for the loss of 4,000 coal mining jobs in the state over the past two years, claiming, "Those are direct jobs, the primary good-paying jobs…That's devastating" (qtd. in Lawrence). By positing coalmining as the only economic possibility for the people of West Virginia, Raney creates fear in the populace. Akin to brainwashing, these campaigns both keep people out of power and content in their lot, presenting those who still have jobs within these mining operations as lucky rather than exploited.

The figure of the hillbilly, with roots in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century literature and industrial exploitation, may seem to be fixed and unchanging through time. In actuality, however, the stereotype of the hillbilly, like all stereotypes, is malleable and unstable, and it is this very instability that makes possible its disruption.

Depending on the situation, the hillbilly stands in for different issues. As concerns change, so does the hillbilly, creating a figure that, when examined in all its incarnations, undermines the simplicity that the stereotype invokes. The hillbilly's representation mirrors how Appalachia is viewed, but neither the hillbilly nor Appalachia has been represented consistently over time. In fact, as representations of the region vacillate between extremes, so do conceptions of the hillbilly.

In one popular understanding of the figure, the hillbilly takes on a dualistic representation as either a figure of nostalgia or a boogeyman that the rest of the country should fear. Because the figure of the hillbilly, as well as his meaning, has evolved over time, this "changeability [is] rooted in its core ambiguity as a representation of a 'white other' that both celebrates and denigrates the American past and the folkways of the southern mountain folk" (Harkins 220). On the one hand, Appalachia is the devolved other, a region that does not fit into acceptable representations of America. On the other, Appalachia represents an earlier time in this country, one that is wholesome and folksy and nostalgic. Mirrored in these dueling representations of Appalachia is the representation of the hillbilly himself. In *The Beverly Hillbillies*, he is Jed Clampett, a lovable man who is out of step with modern conveniences. In James Dickey's *Deliverance*, he is a frightening, xenophobic figure, one for whom violence is a natural response. These extremes lead to the population of the region being pulled in two directions, as either wholesome or frightening, disallowing other representations of the people of Appalachia.

This already problematic representation is further disrupted when the hillbilly's characterization also takes on pressing national concerns, fragmenting the hillbilly even further. He is both "a Frankenstein figure, compiled of all the parts that a society rejects" and "a blank canvas upon which the anxieties of an America in crisis can visually play out" (Massy 126). He has been shaped in various ways over time in order to psychically work through national transformations. He has "served at times of national soul-searching and throughout the twentieth century as a continually negotiated mythic space through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to reconcile the past and the present" (Harkins 4). At different times in history, the hillbilly has offered a counterpoint to American anxieties. Post-World War II, he offered a salve to anxieties about the growing dependence on technology, while during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, the hillbilly in television shows such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* presented "a bucolic and lily-white southern landscape… [that] celebrated the homespun goodness of southern whites, and by extension, America as a whole" (Harkins 174). In these shows, the hillbilly took on multiple representations, on the one hand as the previously mentioned figure of nostalgia, and on the other as a figure that belied the reality of a South where rampant racism and racial violence existed. And as mentioned previously, silent films of the early twentieth century presented the female hillbilly as a warning that stepping out of traditional gender roles would have devastating consequences. Examined in multiple time periods as mirroring different concerns, the hillbilly changes repeatedly. In ways that undermine the monolithic view of the stereotype, the hillbilly has split into the

hapless buffoon, the violent mountain man, a symbol of the nostalgic past, a warning for women, and the peaceful southerner.

Recent configurations of the stock hillbilly character in reality television shows further undermine the stereotype's simplistic construction, the idea of there being a "real" hillbilly thus creating even more possibilities for the figure's disruption. From *Duck Dynasty* to *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the hillbilly character continues to evolve and to entertain. The concept of reality television tells viewers that not only does the hillbilly exist, but he is "authentic." *Buckwild*, a 2013 TV show filmed in southern West Virginia, followed the backwoods antics of nine teenagers. It highlighted their hillbilly ways, including racing vehicles through mud, squirrel hunting, and speaking with thick West Virginia twangs. Though the show strove to portray the simple life of the hillbilly, actual reality intervened, as one of the teens was arrested on drug charges and another died of carbon monoxide poisoning. These very real incidents undermined both the idea of "reality" television and the portrait of the hillbilly as a backward, carefree figure, as the real reality of West Virginia as a place with very real problems got in the way. *Buckwild*'s second season was canceled, leaving the more complex story of the hillbilly untold.

Buckwild's cancelation serves as an instance where popular culture rips the stereotype apart, or at least makes rupture possible, offering a way to undermine the hillbilly stereotype more fully. While the stereotype must "repeat itself to establish certain 'truths,'" these repetitions must be consistent in order to bolster the idea of the stereotype as continuous (Alonzo 3). In the case of reality television's representation of

the hillbilly, this lack of consistency creates "a multiplicity of meanings or truths, which cannot all equally stand within the stereotype's logic" (Alonzo 3). By portraying the hillbilly as existing in a "real" reality, these shows have ultimately helped to undermine the hillbilly archetype. While these multiple representations of the hillbilly have not subverted the stereotype completely, they do expose the heterogeneity of the hillbilly. If the hillbilly figure becomes disrupted, simplistic representations of Appalachia become disrupted as well. In disrupting these homogenous representations of Appalachia, there now exists a space for more diverse representations of the population, ones that exist outside of the insistence that all of Appalachia is poor, white, rural, and working class.

With so many different representations of the hillbilly in existence, and sometimes in competition, the idea of disrupting the stereotype becomes much more plausible. While the hillbilly is represented as being both a nostalgic and a violent figure, he also offers insight into national problems, including women's rights and the southern Civil Rights Movement. Add to these the "authentic" hillbilly in reality television, and the hillbilly himself becomes a much more complex figure than previously conceived. While still existing as stereotype, his representation does not fit so easily into the assumption that the stereotype is made up of "a few, simple essential characteristics" that are "fixed by nature" (Hall 257). Instead, multiple representations of the hillbilly figure have shown him to be multifaceted, undermining the very idea of a homogeneous figure. Portrayals of the hillbilly as varied and changing also bring about questions of what exists in reality – where the stereotype ends and "authentic" representations begin.

In literature, questions of authenticity began to arise in earnest in the nineteenth century. As previously discussed, regionalist fiction found popularity in people's dissatisfaction with a national culture that they began to view as too homogenous. People valued these regional experiences "precisely because these sorts of differences signified authenticity and rootedness" (Barrish 79). With the quest for local culture came the question of what it meant to be "authentically" regional. Dialects became a central feature of local-color writing, with authors striving to write the most realistic dialogue and readers judging them for their efforts. While some readers based their judgment on familiarity with the region's speech patterns, others judged the dialogue on how similar it was to that of other writers (Barrish 76-77). The rise of regionalism, then, had its own unintended consequences. It led to a new homogenized dialogue, creating stereotypes through the very quest for authenticity. Further, it assumed that insiders to a group could assess what was authentic to a region. While there have been many instances of outsiders creating stereotyped views of a region, insiders can fall into this same trap. Authenticity defined through regionalism still posits the idea of an essentializing set of characteristics that define a group, which again leads to stereotyped representations and excludes anyone who does not fit into a particular preconception.

The idea of an authentic narrative may lead to the assumption that a community's "truths" are "unproblematic, transparent and easily accessible," when questions of authenticity are anything but simple (Shohat and Stam 178). Because realities are varied and changing, the idea of a static regional authenticity is a fiction that has led "to the view that a region consists of a certain clutch of features that mark everyone from the

region in much the same way" (Katz and Mahoney xiv). This understanding ignores cultural differences brought about by race, sex, religion, socio-economic factors, and other traits. Because "discussions of region are always implicitly also discussions of ethnicity, race, and the possibility of pluralism: of who 'naturally' belongs," these discussions of authenticity bring about questions of inclusion and exclusion, again creating a vision of place that relies upon expectations of what is "true" or "real" rather than the place as it actually exists (Katz and Mahoney xvii). In the case of Appalachia, questions of authenticity led to Fox's mountain man and his later incarnation as hillbilly, creating a fictitious and homogenized regional population, erasing all who exist outside of this representation.

The question of authenticity further leads to essentializing certain "real" experiences while erasing others because they are deemed inauthentic. By offering only certain realities as "authentic," these populations and experiences become the only ones that exist, the fundamental definition of a culture, never allowing for different representations. While most scholars would argue that essentialism is "dead in contemporary cultural studies," Jeff Karem claims that essentialism "has survived and is thriving, having gone incognito under the rubric 'authenticity'" (9). Because the concern for authenticity has allowed for few versions of place to proliferate, there are often fewer versions of place available for readers to understand the heterogeneous cultures that exist within many regions, with the result that "works that have eschewed local color, rejected self-exoticization, or otherwise violated expectations of what is accepted as 'authentic' have found censure or a cold reception" (Karem 3). Questions of authenticity continue to

shape what is published today, keeping some fields homogenous in their representations of populations and cultures (Karem 5). As Sarah Baird points out in the example at the beginning of this chapter, Appalachia is consistently viewed as "poor, backward, and white," at best positing people that do not exist within this framework as "outsiders," and at worst erasing their existence entirely. This censuring and erasure can lead to a body of literature that is full of poor, white hillbillies and includes no other aspects of the region's culture.

Because some voices are silenced in the quest for a homogenous truth, authenticity itself has become a question of power relations. Mark Allen Roberts poses authenticity as "a debate over who has the power to narrate and thus construct popular notions of cultural identity" (29). Wolfgang Hochbruck echoes this claim, stating that authenticity is "not a problem of bloodlines but of markets and political positions," while Karem claims that what is published and how it is received is shaped by "intense political and economic interests" (26; 3). The idea of an authentic Appalachia has been written and rewritten by those in power – often writers with little firsthand knowledge of the region and industries that are more concerned with controlling resources and profit than with accurately representing the people of West Virginia and the rest of Appalachia. These industries use their power to silence voices within the population in order to keep control over the land and its resources. When those in power represent Appalachia as being a land of hillbillies, they ignore all of the other identities and cultures that make up the region, erasing entire populations. Stereotypes create a monolithic culture where the people are backward, poor, white, xenophobic, fecund, and stupid. If authenticity is

linked to the question of who has the power to narrate a culture, authenticity itself must cease to be a concern, or at the very least, we must recognize that authenticity can describe many different representations of the same subject. There must be an understanding that each representation may be valid in its own right but that there are a number of different ways to represent a region.

Instead of authenticity existing as a static entity, it should be the case that "the authentic is not a thing but an idea that is batted back and forth like a ping-pong ball," which would mean that authenticity is always under construction, just as regional identity is always under construction (Roberts 31). While questions of power and industrial exploitation would continue to be an issue in how Appalachia is viewed, new understandings of what it means to be authentic would allow space for different representations of the region. As these new narratives emerge, our understanding of the people, the place, and the culture would then evolve along with the status of their authenticity. Because stereotypes do not allow for shifting understandings of place and culture, they would lose some of their validity. Through a new understanding of authenticity as an always shifting construct, Appalachia and its population could be rewritten in a variety of ways. This revision would include communities that have previously been excluded and expand narrow definitions of cultural practices.

Contemporary understandings of regionalism have helped to refocus questions of authenticity, as for many current scholars what is important lies not in what is authentic but in questions of cultural identity, not in what is real or unreal but in how different people within a culture self-identify. "By discarding an essentialist notion of regionalism

that argues that the direction of culture is determined by a particular natural environment or that core values or characteristics define an 'authentic' place or identity, contemporary scholarship has been able to demonstrate precisely how social interests determine competing identities, including those of place" (Katz and Mahoney xviii). By moving the focus from whether or not a reality is actually represented in a given text, contemporary regionalisms explore the creations of the representations, focusing on different issues. New regionalists are concerned less with what is right or wrong and more with the identity politics behind whose story gets told and whose is forgotten. As Douglas Reichert Powell observes, "Instead of asking whether a particular version of region is valid or invalid, authentic or not, this new regional scholarship asks whose interests are served by a given version of a region. In short, the emphasis is not on what regions are but why they are that way, on what they do as much as what has been done to them." While "authenticity" never seems to disappear completely in regionalist work – and will arise again later in this chapter in critical responses to Pancake's and McClanahan's texts – it assumes a monolithic reality that rarely, if ever, exists. Questions of authenticity universalize experiences, simplifying complex problems. While the question of cultural identity allows for a shared Appalachian identity, this Appalachian-ness is also made up of individual experiences that people bring to said identity. What it means to be Appalachian is then a grab-bag of cultural references, and different people embody different aspects of those references, no one embodying all of the them, everyone bringing something different to what it means to be a part of this region.

Because Pancake's and McClanahan's work is both responsive to stereotypes and heterogeneous in its representations of Appalachia, it parallels forms of contemporary regionalism, particularly Douglas Reichert Powell's critical regionalism, which has dismantled previous representations of Appalachia and intervenes in "ongoing debates and discourses that coalesce around particular geographical spaces" (Powell). Powell's *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* aims to create a new understanding of regionalism, one that offers a lens for understanding regionalism's role in contemporary society. Powell's critical regionalism calls for a new school of regionalism where region is always viewed as a deliberate construction that takes into account who does the constructing, who is left out of the construction, what story that construction tells, and what is at stake in the construction. In Powell's analysis, regions are constantly shifting, being written and rewritten, with everyone having the ability to forge connections between places and revise how a region is viewed. Critical regionalism links "individual moments of cultural struggle to larger patterns of history, politics, and culture, by understanding how they are linked not only in time and in the nebulous networks of discourse but also in space, through relationships of power that can be material and cultural" (Powell). Most importantly for the purposes of this chapter, critical regionalism is social action, and all texts are cultural practices just as all cultural practices are texts through which a region is created and sustained. Critical regionalism is an activist and advocate regionalism, where the writer's role is "not only to criticize but also to plan … the construction of texts that can envision more just and equitable landscapes" (Powell).

If, for Powell, critical regionalism is a way to assert what the relationships between places are or ought to be, Pancake and McClanahan do similar work, as their texts contradict stereotypes about Appalachia, while they also create different ways of understanding the region. Because "the creation of texts about place… is a part of the larger construction of place itself," *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place*, and my creative dissertation help to construct new versions of West Virginia and all of Appalachia (Powell). In this way, critical regionalism becomes a practice of empowerment and activism. Instead of constantly negating stereotypes and pejorative statements about Appalachia, critical regionalism gives these writers agency as creators of culture. I see Pancake's and McClanahan's texts – and I hope my own stories as well – as a kind of rewriting of Appalachia, creating new representations of the culture. Through our creative work, we are remaking Appalachia as we see it and as we want it to be viewed.

Breece D'J Pancake and the Hillbilly

In *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, Pancake portrays many issues that are commonly a part of the hillbilly stereotype – poverty, violence, and alcoholism – yet he does so with such depth that the stories undermine simplistic understandings of these problems. Instead, he portrays these issues through the singular lens of each character's world, portraying a bleak landscape where everyone exists on the edge of despair. From this desolation, some goodness peeks through: a love of the land, a respect for family, and a sentimental nod toward times past. Though Pancake never hints that his stories respond to stereotypes that plague representations of West Virginia, his fiction is

important in understanding how authors reappropriate and repurpose stereotypes because he portrays the very people many of the stereotypes represent – rural, poor, white, and working class. Pancake writes about coal mining and losing family land and the hunger that results from missing a day's work. Still, if stereotypes tell us that the poverty in West Virginia is not serious and is the fault of the people themselves, Pancake's stories upend those views. Though the archetypal hillbilly may be a drunk, lazy, fighter, Pancake complicates these representations and creates characters in which the hillbilly disappears inside the men and women who populate his stories. He offers a darker, bleaker version of the people and the place than any of these stereotypes have offered. Pancake's very tone responds to the stereotypes, as his stories impart a sense of gravity for each character's situation. He also offers the hillbilly figure as a critical reference point for the bleak economic conditions of West Virginia in the 1970's. The poverty that winds itself throughout the collection portrays an area and a population that has been used and forgotten by corporate interests. While conventional stereotypes of this region's culture and people are tongue-in-cheek in their humorous depictions of men in overalls without teeth or shoes holding bottles of moonshine, nothing about Pancake's stories is whimsical. Pancake's characters see their lives through eyes that understand the seriousness of the bleak world that confronts them. Neither idealized nor denigrated, Pancake's West Virginia contains lives and situations that exist between these simplified extremes.

Pancake was born and raised in Milton, West Virginia, a small town in the southern part of the state. Throughout his childhood and early adulthood, he sought out

the stories told by men and women who had lived in the state their whole lives, creating his fiction from their realities (Edwards 12). *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* was written during his time as an MFA student at the University of Virginia. While there, he published the first story in his collection, "Trilobites," in *The Atlantic Monthly*. After this publication, *The Atlantic* wanted more, and *The New Yorker* showed interest in his work (Edwards 14). Unfortunately, on April 8, 1979, at the beginning of a promising career, Breece D'J Pancake committed suicide. His stories have lived beyond him, with the hardcover edition of *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* first published in 1983 and the paperback following soon after.

Pancake's stories portray social concerns that many West Virginians confronted during the 1970's, and by portraying characters that respond to these situations differently, he depicts a more heterogeneous population. Two stories in the collection are representative of a situation that has plagued people in the state: whether to remain in West Virginia and choose from limited options or to leave the area in hopes of a better life. In the first story, "Trilobites," Pancake introduces Colly, who refuses to leave the farm where he was raised, understanding the land as his home, knowing that he would have more opportunities if he left, but unwilling to desert the land he understands. Colly contrasts Hollis in the book's last story, "First Day of Winter." Rather than loving the land where he was raised, Hollis feels trapped by his elderly parents and their farm, both of which he is required to take care of. Even as he makes his parents cry with the knowledge that he does not want them or their farm, Hollis thinks about himself and his own entrapment, the land and his family acting as a noose around his neck.

Through depicting the question of whether to stay or go, Pancake mirrors a very real problem many people in the state confronted in the 1970's. In these stories, as well as many others, one sees major economic changes as corporations consolidated farms, making family-owned farms less and less profitable. While some people chose to stay and work in the mines, others moved north to Ohio and Michigan to work in factories. This struggle between the need to leave and the desire to stay runs throughout the collection and shows the myriad responses to the changing economic climate in the state. By portraying characters' different reactions to similar problems, Pancake preemptively counteracts ideas of homogeneity in the people. Other stories offer different views of what it means to stay in or leave West Virginia, while still others examine the relationships between men and women, between parents and children, and among peers. What holds them together is that all explore what it means to live in or leave West Virginia, what life means for the people in Pancake's version of the region.

While many stereotyped representations of the mountaineer portray him as unconcerned with his poverty, Pancake's stories show the desperation that comes with the lack of options that accompanies extreme poverty. "A Room Forever" offers one stark example of this desperation. In this story, the unnamed protagonist is the second mate on a ship. He explains that his job consists of "everything the captain or first mate won't do," and that it is "kind of dangerous" (57). This is an understatement, as he thinks about "walk[ing] the wet steel edges" and cautions himself "not to think about going out" on the boat (53, 54). The true danger of his job becomes clear when the narrator spots Prince Albert, a man who also used to work on the boats sailing the river and who

is now "just a gov't suck…dirty and smells like any wino on the street" because "he cauterized his brain with a forty-volt system aboard the *Cramer*" (55). In Prince Albert, the narrator sees what he too can become if he is so unlucky. Still, he has no choice; when asked why he remains in his position, he notes that, "[s]ome things are worse" (57). Those "things" include many jobs in this collection, both legal and illegal, as well as unemployment and the desperation that comes with it.

Pancake portrays this character's poverty as going hand-in-hand with a deep-seated loneliness, which reinforces the emotional and mental toll that comes with poverty. As the narrator's job requires him to spend one month on the boat, followed by one month off, it is clear that this character lives for the paltry money he makes and seems to have no ties to the world beyond the job that he cautions himself not to think about. "A Room Forever" takes place on New Year's Eve, which is traditionally a time of new beginnings and celebrations, yet the protagonist has rented a room in a hotel near the river dock where his tug is anchored. His thoughts are consumed by his upcoming employment rather than the night's celebration. He never mentions any other people he knows, and throughout the story, he interacts only with strangers. When he thinks about going to a bar to "tie one on," he remembers the dangers of his work and decides that he had better not, that it would be better to drink alone and go to bed early, as it is "better not to think about going out" on the water the following day (53, 54). He reminisces about past New Year's parties when he was in the Navy, presumably the only time he felt any real camaraderie, but again he cautions himself not to think of anything beyond his current reality. Here, Pancake offers a man who repeatedly interrupts his own

thought processes, as everything in his present and past gives him pain. He comes to the nadir of his loneliness after being laughed at by a drag queen who is staying in an adjacent hotel room:

> I hear him laughing at me, laughing because I am alone. All the way down the stairs I can hear his laugh. He is right: I need a woman – not just a lousy chip – I need the laying quiet after that a chip never heard of. When I come out to the lobby full of fat women and old men, I think this is all the home I have. Maybe I have bought this room forever – I might not need another flop after tonight. (54)

While it is obvious that real intimacy rather than a prostitute's companionship is the narrator's own idea, he attributes it to the drag queen's laughter, assuming that the man sees into his mind. Attributing this knowledge to someone else gives the narrator a connection to the world, even if it is tenuous. Still, Pancake offers a man bereft of all ties to the world. In fact, the idea that he has bought this room "forever" and that he might not need another room in the future leads one to believe that he may end his life in that room. Even the hint of his own suicide, though never mentioned again, shows how destitute he is. The protagonist goes on to think about "how all my fosters were old and most of them dead by now. Maybe it's better they are dead or I might go back and visit them and cramp their style" (54). He not only lacks any current ties to others, but the tie everyone is supposed to have, family, has been cut as well. Here, the true poverty of his life is laid bare, consisting of nights alone in flophouses and months of doing dangerous labor on a riverboat.

Pancake crams this barrage of thoughts in the first two pages of the story, portraying the all-encompassing bleakness of poverty. The character is bereft of hope, and the world he sees around him is tinged with his depression. Though others may be enjoying the town and their holiday parties, the narrator is unable to see their joy – instead, his world is portrayed without color or cheer. He even notices his own misery when he reflects that, "Moping around these towns for nine months has made me screwy; walking barges and securing catheads in high water has finally gotten me down here with the rest of the cruds" (54). Because his life away from the boat is that of a drifter without family or friends, the narrator always returns to his job as the source of his downfall, as the one thing that takes all pleasure from his life. It is obvious though that it is more than his job that has left him alone. From a childhood in a number of foster homes to an adulthood populated by strangers, he has never been allowed, nor ever allowed himself, the company of others. Yet, as he states throughout the story, there are some realities worse than his, such as that of the homeless man he laughs at when a breeze blows away the newspapers the man planned to use as a bed (55). By portraying the narrator facing the one reality worse than his own, Pancake also shows the true bleakness of his life. Like many stories in the collection, the character here seems to live on the precipice of homelessness, sure that his own reality is better than a life on the streets but still full of depression and loneliness.

If the hillbilly woman is either a whore or a Madonna figure, Pancake presents the unnamed female prostitute in this story as someone who cannot be so easily put into a category, undermining simplistic classification. For her, the sentiment of other choices

being worse is especially true, as she is fourteen or fifteen, and even the narrator has trouble understanding her role. He describes her as looking "like a kid who had a home once," wearing "jeans, a real raincoat, a plastic scarf on her head" (55). When she smiles the narrator thinks "how she ought to be off playing jacks or something," which shifts the focus to her age and lost childhood, rather than her current role as prostitute (57). Because she does not belong in either the town or in this profession, she stands out as being even more poverty-stricken than the narrator, though the reasoning behind her downfall remains a mystery. While she may someday become the whore, a role that pigeonholes many hillbilly women, she is currently a lost girl who is too innocent for the profession in which she finds herself. Instead of the scorn that a wizened prostitute might garner, Pancake's characterization includes pity for this girl, even without explaining how she has gotten to this place in her life.

If, in stereotypes, poverty is never this bleak, the hillbilly never this evil, the women never this lost, in the relationship between the narrator and the prostitute Pancake writes characters who are capable of new levels of depravity when they have lost all hope. The prostitute's childlike demeanor stands in direct contrast to how the narrator first views her – as someone who sees into him. When he spots her, he states, "she keeps looking at me like she is the Wrath of God or something," and before approaching her claims she looks at him "like she knows exactly when I'm going to fall between two barges in a lurch" (55, 56). Here, the narrator almost falls into folklore, another stereotype of this culture, in his understanding of this girl, seeing her as all-knowing, but he stops short of descending into folklore in his actions toward her.

Though she immediately says to the narrator, "I'm not much good at this… The first guy hurt me pretty bad, so I'm always sort of scared," he decides to break her of all illusions of what her life will be like (57). The girl's fear continues as the narrator forces himself upon her, raping her even though he has paid for the sex. He claims, "I know I'm hurting her, but she will never get any breaks" (58). Here, he takes it upon himself not just to live in his own depravity but to bring her to his level, to make sure she knows exactly what her life will entail. Before raping her, he thinks about "what she could be if she had a break or two. But she won't get them here. Nobody here gets a break. I could tell her about my fosters or the ladies in the welfare offices, and the way they looked at me when they put me on a bus for another town, but it wouldn't make any sense to her" (57). In raping her, the narrator makes sure that his unspoken comment would begin to make sense to her, to show her the world through his eyes. If stereotypes often represent poverty as a benign thing that people can lift themselves out of if they would only choose to work harder, Pancake's representation of this young girl is all the more shocking, as he portrays the desperation a person feels, as well as the lengths they will go to, when confronted with an impoverished life bereft of hope.

Even in the characters' attempts to break free from poverty, the result is bleak, and this bleakness continues to break down stereotypical representations of poverty through the depth of characters' emotions concerning their choices. The fact that the narrator never receives any breaks, that no one receives any breaks, serves as a refrain throughout the story, as none of the characters receive any help, each existing in their given roles until they are forced to give up and live a life that is even worse, that of a

"stumblebum," as the narrator refers to the homeless, or to die and be released from the needs of this world altogether. Still, before their eventual surrender, the cast of this story tries to find their own ways out of poverty and hopelessness. After leaving the young prostitute, the narrator later runs into her in a tavern and comments, "I don't guess she knows she can't drink her way out of this" (59), without ever stating what "this" is. It seems obvious that "this" is the life where she has found herself. Of course, the narrator does not seem to register or care that he is the one who showed her exactly how bleak her life is and will remain, that he is the reason she tries to "drink her way out of this." Soon after, the narrator sees that the girl has left the tavern, and when he spots her on the ground out back, both wrists slit, he realizes that she has discovered another way out of this life. Appropriately, given the narrator's perspective, her attempted suicide is unsuccessful, as "she has cut both wrists down to the leaders, but the cold rain has clotted the blood so that only a little oozes out when I move her" (59). After letting the bartender know that "some girl out back tried to kill herself," the narrator leaves, taking no responsibility for her or the desperation for which he is responsible (59). Instead, he proves his own claim that "Nobody here gets a break," even if that break is an easy death (57).

The narrator is achingly aware of his soul's emptiness and understands that the way to survive this desolate world is to bring others as low as himself. As he walks along the river, he thinks about "how shit always sinks… Then I think about that girl sitting in the alley, sitting in her own slough, and I shake my head. I have not gotten that low" (59-60). In this statement, Pancake provides a greater clarity to the depths of the

narrator's poverty, in his worldly life and in his soul. As he shakes his head at how low the young girl has fallen, he has lifted himself up, even if just a fraction of an inch, through seeing someone who has a more depressing life than his own. His own lifted spirits allow him to continue on to the docks to board the ship where he works and to forget the world he is leaving behind. Though he berates the danger of his profession, it becomes his own refuge from the poverty of the world. In "A Room Forever," Pancake offers a West Virginia where poverty and hopelessness exist together, their co-existence a way of life for the people, as "[n]obody here gets a break" (57). If, in the end, the narrator has given himself a break, it is only through forcing someone else to understand exactly how bleak life is. While stereotypes of West Virginia and the Appalachian region have portrayed outsiders viewing the area as bleak, never has it been portrayed as so horrific to the people who live there. Always, the population is portrayed as oblivious to their own backwardness. Here, Pancake offers a version of life where one person sees the emptiness and bleakness of his life, and Pancake gives this character a gut-wrenching reaction to his poverty.

This story's bleak view of the region's poverty is a thread that weaves itself throughout Pancake's stories, creating a portrait of poverty brought about by a lack of options. Yet this portrait of poverty is multifaceted, as each character responds to it differently. In "First Day of Winter," Hollis is trapped on the farm with his parents with no hope of leaving, as the yield from their crops will only pay down debts and leave nothing to replace the cracked engine block in the car. Colly in "Trilobites" may not want to leave the land where he grew up, but he has no choice as the farm makes no

money, forcing his mother to sell. In "Hollow," the poverty has a desperate cast to it as Buddy, the protagonist, wishes for money to buy himself a new car and a new trailer, with the phrase "maybe even a double-wide" showing the extent of his dreams for riches (43).

In "Hollow," Buddy is a good example of a character who embodies much of the stereotype of the hillbilly, but as the story moves forward, he becomes a much richer character, disrupting the stereotype, reinforcing the idea that Buddy never could be reduced to the bare bones that the term "hillbilly" implies. Like the hillbilly, Buddy is a hard drinker. He is also a violent man, getting into fights while drunk and not remembering the details later. He is a poor coal miner who lives in a trailer, and his dog is in heat. Without embellishment, these details offer a basic outline of the hillbilly, but Pancake provides a more nuanced picture of Buddy and his life.

Being a coal miner and living in West Virginia epitomizes the hillbilly stereotype, yet "Hollow" introduces a different kind of mine, one that is "nothing like the real mine, no deep tunnels or man-trips, only the setting, lifting, pouring, only the light-flash from caps in the relay" (39). By portraying a counterpoint to the typical mine, Pancake offers both poverty and desperation in the mining activities, rather than the sense of well-being having a mining job is supposed to produce. Buddy works in a privately owned mine that lacks basic support beams or any other safety measures. He and a group of men crouch inside of a tunnel to form a relay that extracts the coal from a seam. While the reader may picture a corporate-owned mine with full safety standards, the mine in "Hollow" belies those expectations. "Hunched on his knees in the three-foot

seam" and without air filters to make sure the air he breathes is clean, Buddy is willing to do whatever it takes to extract himself from poverty (39). He remembers a time before his current impoverished state, "before they moved from the ridge, before the big mine closed, before welfare" (39). Like in "A Room Forever," the character here is driven by desperation, but he has tasted a life outside of poverty, when he earned enough to support himself and put food on the table. Buddy constantly dreams of the money that will come from this coal mine, yet the odds of its ever becoming a "real mine" are low, something the reader understands even if Buddy does not. By underscoring Buddy's lack of economic mobility, Pancake portrays the depth of the poverty that exists here. Through the popular understanding of what a mine is and in contrast to the mine introduced in this story, "Hollow" shows what happens to a region once corporate interests have used up the resources. The characters of this story remember a time "before the big mine closed," when the economic conditions of the area were much different, yet the current time of the story shows a town that has been used and forgotten by corporate interests, a common occurrence as mines continue to close across the state (Lawrence).

If dominant culture offers only the company-model of the coalmine, it also argues that the negative health effects of coal mining are a thing of the past. Black lung and other ailments are portrayed as afflictions that no longer plague miners, as education and improved safety conditions locate these illnesses in the less-evolved past. In "Hollow," Pancake illustrates a different perspective, as Buddy suffers severe health effects from inhaling coal dust. Throughout the story, he coughs and loses his breath

anytime he exerts himself, even when climbing out of the mine, where "even a clam crawl had winded him" (42). He often feels a stabbing pain in his chest, but he holds "his breath against it" and then tries to forget it, rather than registering that this might be a serious condition (47). This information is presented as though commonplace, and Buddy never considers a trip to the doctor, which he cannot afford anyway, nor does he register the seriousness of coughing up blood. These health problems are the effect of inhaling coal dust in these impromptu mines, belying the idea of the coal miner as a benign or even positive role for the hillbilly. Instead, mining continues to be an extremely dangerous job, threatening the very lives of those who undertake it. Of course, if the mining companies had not closed the big mine or had an interest in the people they employed beyond their use as workers, Buddy's ailment might not be so bad. Instead, because the mines have left the area, Buddy cannot concern himself with his own health, and he must work however he can.

Another aspect of the hillbilly stereotype is that he is constantly drunk, usually on moonshine, and in "Hollow," Buddy fulfills this characterization when he gets drunk and blacks out. In this instance, however, his drunkenness is not the amusing picture usually seen with the hillbilly, where a man passes out next to his jug. Instead, "Buddy lay on the trailer's carpet…and tried to remember how he got there… He remembered being driven back by Estep, falling down in the parking lot, and hitting Fred Johnson, but he did not know why" (49). What he does remember is that he began to drink after his girlfriend Sally left him for another man, a man who does not offer promises of having money someday but who has it now and can offer her what Buddy cannot. Rather

than his drinking being something to laugh at, it becomes a coping mechanism, a way for Buddy to deal with the fact that he has lost one more thing in a life where his job and health have already been threatened.

Buddy is also a violent man, another trope of the hillbilly. In the stereotype, the hillbilly fights anyone and everyone, he feuds with other families, but his fighting is always lighthearted, never to be taken too seriously. In Buddy, we see a more serious streak of violence as he lashes out against men, women, and animals, never reflecting on his actions. Instead, violence is a way of life, something to be taken for granted. Buddy's first violent act is to hit his girlfriend. When she says she is tired of staying around for a promise of something more, "[h]is hand flashed across the table, knocking her head askance" (45). This is obviously a common act, as she does not flinch or respond. Instead, "She got up slowly, put her plate in the sink, and walked down the hall to the bedroom" (45). Because of her non- reaction, the reader sees that this is not the first time he has hit her, nor is it anything to get worked up over. The relationship between men and women in Appalachia has been the subject of many stereotypes. Sometimes, traditional gender roles reign, with the man working while the woman stays at home. Other times, the male hillbilly is too lazy to work, so the woman takes on the traditional male roles, becoming masculine in the process. Rarely though does the question of spousal violence arise, as this subject brings a bleakness to Appalachia that stands in contrast to the idea of hillbillies having no clue of their own degeneration.

Buddy is one of many characters in Pancake's stories who could be described as a hillbilly, yet his complexity does not allow this caricature to envelop him. He is drunk

and violent, despicable and pitiable. While it is unclear what has made him this way, his poor health, poverty, and lack of prospects make one question what choices he has in his life. These unlikable characters who exist in a world without choice come up repeatedly in Pancake's work. Through the complexities of the characters and their situations, as well as the bleakness that overwhelms the stories, Pancake's collection moves beyond the stereotypes that plague West Virginia. He offers a rich portrait of the people and the place, his stories becoming reappropriations or counter-representations of those stereotypes. Pancake's version of the state is only one of many, and it is a varied one with many different ways of living, with lives worth exploring, with stories like no others.

Ironically, while critics laud the depth and beauty of Pancake's work, they also tend to reinforce Appalachian stereotypes through their praise. Whereas Pancake creates a lush and varied population and place, critics see only the harshness of the characters' lives and environment, then link the "harsh reality" to their notion of getting West Virginia "right," as though there were one homogenous Appalachia to get right. Because Pancake's West Virginia corresponds in some ways to stereotypes that label the state as devolved and impoverished, his work, while lush and beautiful, also is repeatedly labeled as portraying the "real" West Virginia. For instance, in an issue of *Appalachian Heritage* that contains a tribute to Pancake and his work, Thomas Douglass writes that because readers interpret the stories "as the author himself speaking of his own life. A quality that is often noted as authenticity," it makes them "either the ultimate con, or pure 100 proof," as though there is nothing in between (73). The preoccupation with

authenticity continues in other essays from this same issue of *Appalachian Heritage*. Donna Ogle writes, "Pancake does something that no one outside the region could ever do and what many who come from the region rarely do well, he gets it right. He doesn't back away from exposing the difficult or the dirty. His stories are honest and direct" (Ogle 68). Here, by offering the idea of Pancake getting it right, Ogle also sets up the notion that the "right" West Virginia is difficult and dirty, she does not acknowledge that this is only Pancake's version of the place and its people. Though she offers no examples of what it is that he gets "right," beyond discussing the unflattering picture that Pancake renders of the place, as well as the "stark and unrelenting" mountains and "the overwhelming sense of darkness lurking behind every written word," Ogle does offer her stamp of approval on these stories as somehow depicting this region in the correct way, one that seems to be authentic (68).

As I have alluded to, the focus on authenticity is an inverted stereotype, offering an idealized version of Appalachia, one that is the opposite of the denigrated representation that many stereotypes offer but is a stereotype nonetheless. Such a move can only lead to new simplified and homogenized definitions of people and places that do not exist in reality. Ann Pancake, a distant cousin of Breece Pancake's and a West Virginia writer and native herself, offers a different way of looking at the West Virginia that Pancake creates in his stories. "The question is not do they [Pancake's stories] authentically represent West Virginia. There are many West Virginias, just like in a river there are different temperatures, different tempos, different colors depending on the light—and Breece is standing in one particular current" (80). In the vein of critical

regionalism, she allows for the diversity of this place and the stories that can be told about it, offering Breece Pancake as writing one version of the place, one that exists among many. Still, as Pancake writes of a rural, poverty-stricken place full of people who are either stuck in West Virginia or planning to leave, all of which builds off of stereotypes of the place, it is easy to see how some critics would portray Pancake's West Virginia as the "right" one. Because many people conflate stereotypes with truth, Pancake appears to portray a "true" version of place, even as his version of the hillbilly offers more depth to the characters and choices in the place itself. Because Pancake writes of a very specific population, the poor and downtrodden, his stories conjure stereotyped images. Stating that his stories are "right" or "accurate" only reinforces stereotypes, not allowing for different versions of the place, limiting West Virginia's representation in literature and popular culture.

Even as Thomas Douglass offers an either/or vision of West Virginia's authenticity, he also offers Breece Pancake as beginning something new in literature, writing that Pancake's stories "served notice of the emergent Appalachian Renaissance" (Douglass 76). Here, he refers to the field of Appalachian Studies that emerged in the mid-twentieth century and had resurgence in the 1970's, as scholars sought to separate Appalachian culture from that of the South. Pancake was one of several writers during this time to create an Appalachia that was different than the South that had been written about before him (Miller 82-83). Though Pancake did not create Appalachian literature, he did carve a path for writers who would come after him, including Scott McClanahan, who will be discussed shortly, as well as Silas House, Ron Rash, Lee Maynard, and

Wiley Cash. Each of these writers also offers a different view of the region, one that is shaped by the place they have experienced. Pancake's West Virginia is a dark place, one that uses the stereotypes that others have created and turns them into something new.

Scott McClanahan and Industrial Exploitation

While Pancake creates a portrait of poverty, beauty, and bleakness that counteracts stereotypes, in *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place*, Scott McClanahan uses his anger at the coal industry to show how social conditions in West Virginia have come to exist. He is not so much critical of the representations of the hillbilly as he is the industrial exploitation that has given rise to the figure. In fact, he embraces the hillbilly at the beginning of the book, using him as a rhetorical tool to make the point that if there is any truth in the stereotype, it lies in the coal industry's exploitation of the region rather than the Appalachian's innate laziness or violence. Throughout the text, McClanahan recognizes the stereotypes that plague the region, and much of the book seems to be written in direct response to those stereotypes. Whereas Pancake never shows that he is aware of them and instead creates a portrait that cannot be reduced to such simplicities, McClanahan proposes that stereotypes contain kernels of truth that encompass the complex explanations behind them. He argues that if there is any truth to the hillbilly stereotype, it is because of the industrial exploitation that has created conditions in which nothing beyond this devolved figure can flourish.

McClanahan was raised in West Virginia and continues to reside in the state. He received an undergraduate degree from Concord College and a master's degree from Marshall University, both in West Virginia. *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place* is his

fourth book, and he has also co-founded a press and production company, Holler Presents. Though McClanahan did not receive much press for his first three books, *Crapalachia* put him and West Virginia in the national spotlight, with reviews in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

From the title to the cover to the first chapter of his book, McClanahan's response to the stereotypes that plague West Virginia clearly incriminates the coal industry. The title is quite telling, *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place*, for by referring to Appalachia as Crapalachia, McClanahan seems to offer a negative judgment of a large region. Yet looking only at the title, it is unclear how he is using this judgment: is it a personal assessment of the place, is it something outsiders say, or is it something else entirely? As becomes clear upon reading the text, McClanahan offers this term somewhat tongue-in-cheek, allowing for outside viewpoints of Appalachia as "crap" but also hinting at all of the external forces that have created this representation of the region. The second half of the title offers more insight into the content of the book, as McClanahan refers to the text as a "biography of a place." Because of its Greek roots (*bios* meaning "life" and *-graphia* meaning "writing"), the term most typically refers to writing about a person's life, but McClanahan offers biography as referring to the life of a place, a new and different understanding of the term. Taken as a whole, the two parts of the book's title offer insights into the text, but they also ask the reader to grapple with new terms as well as new ways of understanding words they have already heard. By beginning in such a way, McClanahan has already offered his readers the notion that this book explores a new way of thinking about place and about Appalachia in particular.

The cover offers further insight into the political commentary McClanahan will use throughout the text as a means to dismantle stereotypes about the region[1]. The dominant image is from a 1917 political cartoon from Australia, "The Orange knockout: political cartoon of John C.L. Fitzpatrick, secretary for mines and treasurer, and the coal strike, 1917/unknown photographer and colorist" ("State Library of New South Wales"). The original image is a montage that includes the photographed heads of John C.L. Fitzpatrick and an unnamed miner, both of which are inserted into a painted picture of Fitzpatrick with a rooster's body and the miner with a hen's tail feathers. Fitzpatrick stands on a fencepost directly above the miner, presumably ordering him back to the mines, as the strike of 1917 ended only when Fitzpatrick quashed it legislatively, forcing the miners, railway workers, and waterside workers back to work ("State Library of New South Wales"). The cover of McClanahan's book includes only Fitzpatrick's head with its rooster body standing atop a fencepost, notably carrying the outside influence that ended the strike and not the mine worker (see fig. 1). As becomes evident in the text, McClanahan often refers to injustices in West Virginia's mining industry as a way to understand the poverty and politics in the state. The use of this picture on the cover hints at the political commentary that McClanahan presents in the text. Though the picture of Fitzpatrick refers to a mining strike in Australia, coal mining strikes and violent suppression were also happening in the United States and West Virginia. The political cartoon is inclusive of all miners' strikes in the early twentieth century. As in the picture,

[1] McClanahan had a large influence on the cover. He suggested the artist to his publisher and then worked with the artist to create this rendering of it, helping to create the political commentary that is evident upon first seeing the book (McClanahan interview).

the striking miners were “hens,” without the right to demand safe working conditions, and the industrial leaders and legislators were the roosters that quashed these strikes without meeting workers’ demands.

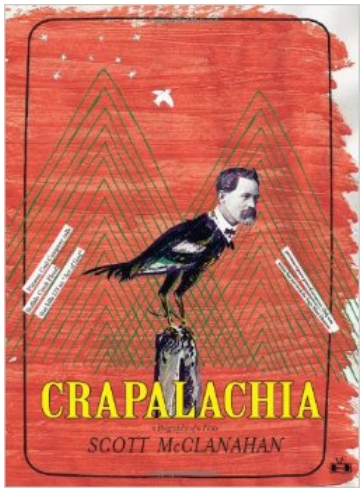

Fig. 1. The cover of Scott McClanahan’s *Crapalachia: A Biography of a Place*

To bolster this connection to the injustices perpetrated by coal companies, the cover also prominently displays two quotes from area newspapers, both of which refer to mining disasters. These quotes are the first hint at the methods McClanahan will use to help readers understand stereotypical representations of the state. The first quote, “Pittston Coal Company calls Buffalo Creek Flood that kills 125 an ‘Act of God,’” stands to the left of Fitzgerald’s image. This flood occurred February 25, 1972 in Logan County, West Virginia, when a makeshift dam constructed of coal sludge burst after days of intense snow and rain. Pittston Coal, the company that had constructed the sludge dam, did not warn downstream residents nor nearby officials who could have

helped with the disaster when they knew that the collapse of the dam was probable. The dam's failure sent "132 million gallons of black waste water rush[ing] through the narrow Buffalo Creek hollow." The death and destruction was staggering: "125 dead, 1,100 injured, and over 4,000 left homeless. One thousand cars and trucks were destroyed. The flood demolished 502 houses and 44 mobile homes and damaged 943 houses and mobile homes. Property damage was estimated at $50 million." All of this occurred in fewer than three hours. Federal, state, and citizen commissions studied the disaster and concluded that Buffalo Mining "disregarded standard safety practices." In response, Pittston Coal "called the flood an 'Act of God' and said the dam was simply 'incapable of holding the water God poured into it.'" Pittston Coal was never indicted on any charges for the accident, and much of the promised rebuilding never happened, though a number of private lawsuits were filed against the company ("Buffalo Creek").

The quote on the other side of Fitzgerald reads, "previous reports proved incorrect. Only one miner has survived the Sago Mine Disaster." This comment refers to the January 2, 2006 explosion at the Sago Mine in Upsher County, West Virginia. The explosion trapped 13 miners for two days. It was originally reported that 12 of the 13 miners had survived, and this was found to be false only after family members had been notified. In reality, only one miner survived. According to *The New York Times*, it took three hours for mining company officials to inform the families of the mistake. In the two years before the disaster, Sago Mine had received more than 270 safety citations ("The Sago Mine Disaster"). By offering information about two mine disasters and a picture of a government official who squelched a strike, the cover of McClanahan's

book offers an indictment of the coal industry in creating the "Crapalachia" that will be described within the text. Though McClanahan tells the stories of his and his family's life in southern West Virginia, the cover and much of the text also indicts the coal industry for the creation of the culture of "Crapalachia."

Contradictorily, in using the first chapter of his book to illustrate his awareness of the stereotypes that plague the region, McClanahan seems to reinforce stereotypes, a notion he will counteract in subsequent pages. He showcases a number of family anecdotes that may be viewed as stereotypical, relating the stories so quickly that they can almost be read as a list. He introduces the family, including his grandmother's 13 children, ostensibly reinforcing the stereotype of the fecund hillbilly. He also introduces the family's hometown, Danese, West Virginia, and claims the family grew up "eating blackberries for breakfast and eating blackberries for lunch and watching the snow come beneath the door in the wintertime" (1). By offering all of this information on the first page of the book, McClanahan sets up his family as stereotyped hillbillies. He describes his uncle Stanley as homophobic and bigoted and his grandfather Elgie as simply backward. When Elgie received a letter from the mine that said his pension was not approved, he "took it down to the outhouse and wiped his ass with it. Then he put it back into the envelope, sealed it up, and sent it back" (2). The innate violence that men of this region possess becomes evident in the story of his uncle Leslie who, at age eleven, beat up "The Toughest Man in Fayette County" (2). Poverty rears its head again in stories of boys with untreated ear infections going deaf because their parents did not have the money for a doctor (3-4). Appalachia's innate criminality is depicted when

McClanahan's uncle's name is listed as one of the robbers of the local grocery store (4). McClanahan concludes the chapter saying that the men who stayed in West Virginia ended up convicted felons (5). The only people who save themselves are those who leave. The men go to work in factories in Midwest cities like Flint, Michigan and Cleveland, Ohio, while the women leave and become secretaries (5). McClanahan introduces this information as though those left behind are destined to lead the lives of stereotypical hillbillies.

By beginning the book with a list of specific examples of stereotypes come to life, McClanahan seems to reinforce stereotypes, yet his approach to life in West Virginia is more complicated. By using these descriptions of real-life hillbillies in the opening pages of his book, McClanahan offers the rest of the text as the reasons the residents of the state resemble the hillbilly. As a rhetorical strategy, this chapter's reinforcement of the stereotypes sets the stage for the argument against industrial exploitation that McClanahan lays out in the rest of the book. Because this chapter is a backdrop for everything that follows, the descriptions of McClanahan's family serve as the effect of coal mining disasters and a population forgotten in the pursuit of profits. While his family may be examples of living stereotypes, McClanahan spends the next 160 pages explaining why this is the case.

McClanahan rewrites the official history of the state throughout the book, confronting stereotypes by offering a West Virginia citizen's understanding of both the history of the state and its effects on the current conditions of the people. His text leads readers toward the understanding that if some of the stereotypes are rooted in reality, the

reasons for this are tied to exploitation of both the land and the people. McClanahan's education becomes a motif in the book, as he introduces his "Crapalachia history book" and includes three different chapters, spread throughout the book, that share a very particular understanding of Crapalachian history. His knowledge becomes a gateway to greater cultural memory, a way of understanding the people and place through his eyes. He begins by listing what he read in the textbook, leading the reader to understand that McClanahan is offering his interpretation of what he has read, rather than only the history present in the book. In effect, he is rewriting the official history that is taught in school, and his rendering becomes a cultural memory of the people in the region. He tells how the James River and Kanawha Turnpike were the original gateway to the west, but when the Erie Canal was built, "[t]he Virginians lost. Therefore, New York became New York. But imagine if we would have won. Imagine Crapalachia as the center of the world. Imagine skyscrapers rising from the mountains" (35). Here, readers see a dream from within Appalachia – what it could have been rather than what it is. McClanahan offers this region as having the same potential as other areas of the country, rather than being destined to become what it is today. If West Virginia could have been a center of cosmopolitan activity, any essentialist ideas of the innate degeneration of the region would be undermined.

While the contents of his Crapalachia history book become more outlandish as he continues to describe them, they also bolster McClanahan's argument that the reason these stereotypes contain a kernel of truth is because the stories in his fictional history book are the real stories of this state. McClanahan discusses learning "how to stuff a

ballot box," describing how the party boss fills out a ballot for each man and how each man puts that ballot in the box and returns his blank one to the party boss, who will fill out the ballot for the next man (35). "This goes on all day and then the men are paid in liquor. This is how you get them drunk and steal an election fair and square. This is democracy" (35). At least this is how democracy is practiced in West Virginia. Of course, the irony that the reader is supposed to understand is that these men drink because of the lack of opportunities, the poverty that they will never leave behind. In order to get more alcohol, they must sell their votes, which guarantees that their situation will continue to worsen, making them need more alcohol, leaving them in an endless cycle where they have no say over their own lives. Through this lens, the stereotype of the drunk hillbilly begins to make more sense and becomes less the fault of the individual and more a cultural condition.

McClanahan also offers alternate histories for a number of public events, a technique that turns the official tale on its head and creates a more personal understanding of these events. He writes of a moment when his book tells him "how you build civilization" (35). He describes how Hawk's Nest Tunnel, near Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, was built:

> They used a bunch of poor people to dig it. A poor person means either their skin was dark or their accents were thick. That's the best way to do anything—get a bunch of poor people to do it. So they cut into the mountain but there was a problem. They didn't wet the dust from the cut limestone—so the men developed silicosis. The men started dying by the

> tens and then the twenties and then the hundreds and then—the thousands? Since they were poor the company just buried them. There was an investigation a few years later but no one cared. They were poor people. The official statistic was 476 but the truth is over 1,000 of the 3,000 men lost their lives in a few short days. (35-36)

Here, McClanahan has combined what he read with what people in the area know to be true. His Crapalachia history book tells one version of the truth, the "facts" of what happened building this tunnel, but it does not tell of the actual toll, the story that exists among the disenfranchised, the poor whose "skin was dark" or "accents were thick." These are the people who do not get their own version of history, except that McClanahan is sharing it here. By beginning the book with anecdotes that match popular expectations of Appalachia and its inhabitants, McClanahan has lulled his readers into complacency. Only when he begins to explain the exploitation that the poor suffer does the reality of the first chapter begin to come clear. His family may resemble hillbilly stereotypes, but with different opportunities they could have been something else. The exploitation they have experienced is directly responsible for who they are today.

McClanahan's history lessons also indict the coal industry for its callous disregard for human life, highlighting the inhumane working conditions miners must endure. First, McClanahan lists the number of coal miners killed:

> In 1931: 1,456
>
> In 1932: 1,192
>
> In 1933: 1,051

In 1934: 1,214

In 1935: 1,216

In 1936: 1,319

In 1937: 1,399

In 1938: 1,077. (36)

He then interrupts this list to tell of the Farmington mine disaster, the 1968 underground explosion that left 78 men dead, with only 59 of the bodies ever recovered ("Mine Accidents and Disasters"). McClanahan adds that the "company didn't pay the miners for the half day they missed due to their deaths in the explosion," and then continues to list the death totals for 1939-1941 (36). In many professions, the number of deaths decreases over time, as safety measures are improved, but as McClanahan's numbers show, this does not seem to be the case with coal mining. By presenting the numbers and anecdotes in this way, McClanahan indicts the mines for the exploitation of these workers. He leads the reader to the conclusion that mining has been and continues to be an unsafe profession where profits matter more than human life. Here, McClanahan tells the tale hinted at on the cover, of coal companies in it for their own profits, of the poor being exploited.

In quick succession, McClanahan reinforces and then undermines the stereotype of the stupid hillbilly, portraying the darker truth behind this stereotype. Echoing Pancake's commentary on the desperation of a poverty-stricken population, McClanahan adds that the list and anecdotes of miner deaths "proves that poor people are not smart, and only poor people are desperate enough to work in a hole and then thank god that

they have a job working in a hole" (37). McClanahan follows this statement with the anecdote of William Marland, the West Virginia governor who tried to tax coal companies. He disappeared, only to reappear years later. Marland "tried to protect and help people once. This is what happens to you. You wind up a drunk, driving a taxi cab in the city of Chicago" (37). Thus, one reason stereotypes of the stupid, poor, drunk hillbilly contain a kernel of truth is because he cannot stand up to big coal. No one can. He cannot vote for a person who will change the system. Even if he does vote for someone who will, big coal will crush him. In effect, aspects of the stereotypes may be true, but they are not as simplistic as people would believe. There is a history behind these people and this place, and it is not pretty. It is a picture of bullying and corruption. It is a picture of poor people who do not get paid for a full day's work because they had the audacity to die in an explosion.

McClanahan further undermines stereotypical depictions of coal miners by reinforcing their humanity. Rather than being a group of men without faces or families, McClanahan acknowledges the individuality of the people who are a part of mining disasters. Returning to the Sago Mine disaster referenced on the cover, McClanahan appeals to the victims' humanity:

> I read about the Sago Mine disaster and the men who survived an explosion only to have so little oxygen they all went into the corner of the mine shaft and hid behind a giant rubber curtain… They put on the breathing mask, but there was only an hour of air left. They spent what

time they had left writing letters to their children and wives. The letters went like this:

> *Tell all I'll see them on the other side.*
>
> *It wasn't bad. I just went to sleep. I love you. Jr.*
>
> *Your daddy didn't suffer*. (134)

He begins this paragraph by introducing the Sago Mine disaster as an event in his Crapalachia history book, but given that McClanahan graduated high school in 1996, he was far past school aged when the 2006 disaster occurred (167). Still, McClanahan is making a point about what he learned as a citizen of "Crapalachia," about the lack of safety in the coal mines, about the disasters that too frequently occur, about the very human reactions of those nameless miners. While it is unclear if the examples of letters to family are actual transcripts, they add humanity and individuality to the twelve men who died inside the mine. Instead of being a group of men, they become a father, a man with people to remind of his love, and someone who believes that he will see his family on the other side. By turning the victims into individuals with people who love them, McClanahan breaks them out of any stereotypes that could envelope a nameless, faceless coal miner.

McClanahan also transitions from his typical rambling sentences to shorter, more direct statements in order to underline the gravity of the situation that occurred in the Sago Mine. He writes, "We learned about how rescuers went into the Sago Mine and found the miners. They were still alive. They were all alive. CNN reported all miners found alive except one…. The governor said it was a night of miracles. They made a

mistake though…. They weren't alive. They were all gone. They were all dead except one" (135). Here, McClanahan's use of short declarative sentences gives more gravity to the statements, reinforcing the enormity of this mistake. Not only did a tragedy occur, but the families of the men who wrote those notes believed for hours that their families were alive. It was reported nationally. Still, McClanahan gives the dead men even more humanity when he explains that the only man to survive was in his twenties, that "he survived because the rest of the men in their 50's made the decision to share their oxygen with the younger man, and keep him alive for his young wife and small children" (135). McClanahan heightens the emotional impact of his words by separating the following sentences from everything around them, surrounding them with white space: "The young man watched the older men go to sleep one by one. And then it grew quiet" (135). Here, the twelve men who died, as well as Randal McCloy, the man who lived, become more than hillbillies, more than coal miners. They become loving people who care about one another, people who sacrifice for the man who has the most life ahead of him. Rather than the numbers that come out of mining disasters, these men become more fully realized as people.

McClanahan continues to use the strategy of emphasizing the miners' humanity in the third and final section on mining disasters, "A Short History of Crapalachia Pt 3." He also shows the direct connection these past disasters have on the current residents of the region. He again discusses the Buffalo Creek flood, but this time McClanahan directly connects the disaster to his own life:

> I looked up from the book and put it away. I saw all of the people I had known and loved being washed away in that flood. I saw Ruby and Nathan. I saw Stanley and Mary. I saw my uncles and my aunts and all the McClanahans. I saw Bill and his family. I saw Lee and all the crazy fuckers. I saw Sarah. They were all being washed away and they were all doing something else. They were all screaming. (154)

Through offering this list of family and friends who are being washed away in a flood that occurred over forty years before the book's publication, McClanahan argues that the disasters of the past continue have to an effect on the current population of the area. Because Pittston Coal Company was never indicted on any charges, McClanahan argues, the lives of these people really do not mean much. As far as the coal company is concerned, their statement that so much death and destruction really was an "Act of God" stands true. Yet if this were really the case, all of McClanahan's friends and family would be living under the threat of another "Act of God" destroying their homes and ending their lives. Though McClanahan only refers to people he knows personally, the text includes those he does not know: all those people living in an area where the coal companies can do no wrong. Through this metaphor, McClanahan creates a new way of looking at the people of West Virginia and all of "Crapalachia"; they have no control over their own lives and are at the mercy of the coal industry. While the stereotypes may call these people lazy, McClanahan reminds readers that it is not that the people do not care. Instead, they are stuck in a flood, doing everything they can to save themselves, helpless to change the forces that have put them in this situation.

Though much of McClanahan's text explores West Virginia's stereotypes in a very different way than Pancake, there are moments in McClanahan's book when he describes the same bleakness that exists throughout Pancake's collection. McClanahan again uses the strategy of acknowledging the inhabitants of the text as real people, with the goal that readers will look beyond the stereotypes to see people with individual concerns. McClanahan refers to the lack of hope in his hometown when he discusses returning as an adult to teach at the school he attended as a boy. He notices that a young girl in his fifth grade classroom cannot read. Though he wants to help her, another teacher warns him not to, as the student's mother is a drug addict. "She told me not to get close to the kids like that because they never made it through the school year…. She told me that she had been to a funeral just a few weeks earlier for a student's mother who had overdosed" (147). Rampant drug use has become a more recent phenomenon in the area, destined to become part of the hillbilly stereotype. He is not only drunk on moonshine; he is also high on crank. Still, by advising McClahnahan not to help this young girl, the teacher relegated her to a life of hopelessness, one that an adult McClanahan begins to discover is the fate of many in this area. Here, echoes of the despair in Pancake's work become evident in McClanahan's, though this tonal quality does not envelope the whole of *Crapalachia* as it does Pancake's collection. Instead, this example shows one more way in which exploitation by outside forces continues to damage the people the coal industry has propounded to help.

Poverty and despair are so prevalent in McClanahan's world that even he must substitute lies for hope. Soon after he begins tutoring this student, McClanahan discovers

that Bill, one of his best friends in high school, has been arrested for robbery and murder. McClanahan can only think of "the little boy who had lice… the little boy who collected troll dolls… the little boy who decided to fall in love… the little boy who dreamed of crossing oceans and the elevations of mountaintops" (148). His repetition of the phrase "the little boy" reads as though McClanahan is trying to convince himself that the boy he once knew is not a man that poverty has destroyed so thoroughly, turning him into a murderer. McClanahan soon learns that Bill was dating the girl's mother. And shockingly, the girl confesses that Bill gave her a locket that may have belonged to the woman Bill killed. McClanahan realizes that she is right. Still, he must figure out what to do: this little girl lives a life of hopelessness and may have no way out of it. McClanahan sees that the one thing she has to give her hope is this locket that belongs to a dead woman. He lies and tells her that the locket could not belong to that woman. "This was the sweet thing that made her [the girl] feel loved, and this was a chain that made her feel beautiful" (151). In a life bereft of hope, this little girl has very little to hold on to. McClanahan offers her one allowance: a lie to hold on to. Here, much like in Pancake's work, the text offers the bleakness of the girl's current life and her probable future. Yes, McClanahan allows her to keep a murder victim's necklace, but he has nothing else to give her. As in Pancake's stories, the lack of choices and hope for many of the people in the region shows that the levity of the poverty stereotype is not just wrong – it is irresponsible in the face of such suffering.

While McClanahan expresses anger when he writes about industrial exploitation, his tone is respectful when he writes about the land. This respect offers a different way

of understanding the people and place, through the mountains in which they live. The mountains are not just landscape; they become a part of the people themselves. Though McClanahan depicts his high school friend Bill as a boy with problems of self-esteem and mental illness, he also portrays him as someone who understands that the mountains are a part of them. When Bill recites the names and elevations of the mountains that surround them, McClanahan ignores him. He does not realize that "Bill was telling us about where we were from. He was telling us about our mountains" (96). Later, Bill continues to tell the story of their mountains, and this time McClanahan lists them: "Bill told us about Beelick Knob. He told us about Shafer's Crossing… He was telling us about all of these places. He was telling us something important though. He was telling us where we were from. He was telling us about home" (98). McClanahan understands that he is surrounded by more than clods of earth. The mountains each have their own names and their own stories. They also create a home. For the people who live in the region, "inside of them were mountains" (133). Here, McClanahan argues that the landscape is not separate from the people but is part of them. The people and their history are tied to these mountains in such a way that the two cannot be separated. No longer hillbillies in the stereotypical sense, the citizens of Crapalachia are mountain people, a term that includes both the good and the bad.

McClanahan ends the book by describing taking earth and stone from the mountains and traveling with them. "I gave my dirt away to the people I met. I called it magic dirt… I dropped the stones on the sidewalks. I told them I was going to make the whole world Crapalachia… The whole world would become this place. It would take a

million years and it would take a million trips, but I would rearrange the world" (157). In rearranging the world, McClanahan also rearranges the stereotypes. If the same earth that creates a hillbilly exists in New York City, in Atlanta, in Chicago, in Seattle, and if that earth is what creates the people, what is there to separate the hillbillies from everyone else? If the fact that these people live in Crapalachia makes them something lesser, turning the whole world into Crapalachia makes everyone even. Then, everyone can be a hillbilly. Or no one can.

As with Pancake's work, reviewers of McClanahan's book hold up examples of poor, working class West Virginians as realistic and authentic. Gina Webb's review of *Crapalachia* states that, "[l]ike his fellow West Virginian, the late writer Breece D'J Pancake, McClanahan doesn't pretty up the locals." Like Pancake, McClanahan portrays a working class and poverty-stricken population. Also similar to Pancake's work, McClanahan's book received reviews that sometimes reinforce the stereotypes of West Virginia. Because these stereotypes have become so ingrained in the national consciousness, most of these reviewers do not seem to understand that they are reiterating stereotypes while they praise his book. For instance, Allison Glock, who also grew up in West Virginia, writes, "[g]rotesquerie is a fact of life for certain classes, the wallpaper for folks who dwell beneath a certain rung of the ladder." She equates her experiences with McClanahan's, stating that they both experienced a West Virginia "where existence is both tedious and shocking. Where violence is something to do. The death rattle something to waltz with" (Glock). While quite poetic, Glock reinforces West Virginia as a place solely of poverty and grotesqueries, and while these are a part of

McClanahan's West Virginia, they are not the whole of it. Steve Donoghue calls McClanahan "a master chronicler of backwoods rural America," adding that McClanahan's "setting is the hollows of West Virginia, places of moonshine and dilapidated churches." Neither moonshine nor dilapidated churches are a part of McClanahan's world. In fact, these two things are only mentioned in passing in the book. Discussing both *Crapalachia* and *William Hill*, Weston Cutter claims that McClanahan is obsessed with "depicting the casual grotesqueries and what-the-hell mentality of the West Virginia he was born and raised and still resides in—poor tribal hill folk." While much of the former part of this statement is fine, "poor tribal hill folk" echoes representations of the hillbilly, creating a grotesquerie itself. Ironically, these reviewers laud the very parts of his book that McClanahan holds up as evidence of industrial exploitation, seeming to overlook his argument entirely.

Other reviewers take *Crapalachia*'s West Virginia on McClanahan's terms, not resorting to stereotypes to write about his book. Bill Lynch's review discusses the stereotypes directly. He writes that for people outside of West Virginia, the place is "weird, exotic – the other. There is a tendency, [McClanahan] believes, in romanticizing the other." Lynch shares McClanahan's story of a friend visiting him in Beckley, West Virginia, and this friend's comment that the state did not appear to be poverty-stricken. McClanahan wryly notes that, "it makes you feel bad when they say that. You feel like you let them down, like you didn't show them the poverty they need to see" (qtd. in Lynch). Because stereotypes are so simplistic, it can be confounding when they are

discovered to be false, as though none of these hardships exist if they are not outwardly visible at all times.

McClanahan critiques the field of Appalachian Studies as creating an idealized Appalachia rather than the one that actually exists, arguing that Appalachia is presented in a very specific way in literature. He writes, "college never appears in Appalachian books. We can't admit these sorts of things. We can't admit we've gone to malls. We can't admit we've gone to restaurants. We can't admit we dream our dreams. People won't believe you" (165-66). Many of these reviews seem to support this claim, as West Virginia is presented as the place that the stereotypes say it is, an impoverished grotesquerie. This is why McClanahan writes in the "Appendix and Notes" section that *Crapalachia* "should not be thought of or included in a genre of literature called the Appalachian Minstrel Show. The names of writers who have written in this genre include Lee Smith, Mary Lee Settle, Silas House, and a list that goes on and on. They know who they are" (165). Here, McClanahan indicts those authors who create an idealized version of Appalachia. When they portray the region as devoid of the negative stereotypes, they do not acknowledge the problems that exist there.

McClanahan sees himself as an outsider in how he wries about his home state, and he is not immune to the desire for authenticity. His version of West Virginia is not pretty. In fact, there are many times within his work where the stereotypes survive intact. In an interview with Chris Lee, he claims, "I have been treated like shit at home. I'm looked at as a moral degenerate." He goes on to say, "We have the universities who specialize in 'Appalachian studies' and they simply ignore me because I'm not writing

about coal tattoos and crap like that. I want nothing to do with them really." Because of his subject matter, it seems almost odd that McClanahan does not want to be considered a part of the genre of Appalachian studies, but if he views Appalachian studies programs as only creating an idealized version of the region, it makes sense, since his view of Appalachia is not pretty or easy. Life in his Appalachia is difficult and dirty. "As his title suggests, McClanahan does not offer a sugarcoated or pastoral view of his childhood or Appalachia. Indeed, he takes to task those he believes guilty of this sin" (Sypolt). McClanahan's Appalachia is an angry place, one that has been exploited by industrial concerns. Natalie Sypolt calls McClanahan out on his hatred of the genre of Appalachian literature, writing, "McClanahan asks that his book not be shelved with these others. He means to imply, of course, that his own interpretation stands clearly superior, more true and worthy, than the others. But isn't this the idea of a singular experience – a singular Appalachia – close to the stereotype McClanahan fights?" Here, McClanahan becomes guilty of that which he hates, turning Appalachia into a place and people that can only be viewed in one way, where there is a right and a wrong representation of it. By ousting all of these other authors who write a different Appalachia, especially when he does not specify exactly what it is he finds troubling about their representations, he condemns any version different from his own.

Still, McClanahan's anger has a purpose. He does not allow his family or his version of his home to be forgotten. Glock writes that McClanahan "knows how families like his are buried alive, or worse, misshapen into caricatures for the amusement or edifying pity of others." Taking this as true, it is no wonder McClanahan mistrusts others

to categorize his work. In his review of *Crapalachia* in *Appalachian Journal*, Robert Gipe claims, "[i]t would be difficult for a man to talk that kind of trash about a place—or a fiercesome [*sic*], unstoppable movement like Appalachian Studies—unless one cared about it, or at least what it could be." Maybe this is the key, that McClanahan cares so much about Appalachia that the anger that bristles on the pages of his book is only a hint of the love he holds for this place that has been misrepresented in so many different ways, by so many different people. In *Crapalachia*, McClanahan takes the opportunity to confront the stereotypes the only way he knows how, through anger and righteousness, through confronting those who have helped to skew the story of this place and its people. He has created a book that rewrites what West Virginia is through his very wish for reality to be different.

My Stories and Appalachian Literature

As Pancake and McClanahan have done their best to counteract Appalachian stereotypes in their writing, other Appalachian authors have done the same. Still, some readers may view Pancake and McClanahan as continuing to perpetuate stereotypes about the region. The arena of Appalachian literature has a long and varied history, and whether a writer has successfully written Appalachia will continue to be discussed. As new writers join the fold, readers will scrutinize their work for the presence of simplistic hillbillies, moonshine, feuds, religious zealots, and all the other aspects of backwoods stereotypes, and readers will not be disappointed. They will find people covered in filth in one book and an old woman smoking a pipe in another. It is inevitable. The hope is

that each writer will do more good than harm, creating a new version of Appalachia that helps to rewrite the region on terms that exist beyond stereotypes.

In the end, I had to come to terms with how stereotypes are perpetuated and undermined in both my work and that of other Appalachian writers. I revere the writing of Breece D'J Pancake and think it is some of the best writing to come from the state. I also sometimes wonder at the speech patterns of his characters. Are they too rural? Then I remember, his West Virginia is not my West Virginia. I respect what Scott McClanahan does in *Crapalachia* while also wishing for more artistry in the language. Then I think about the fact that he is also a spoken word artist, and these words would kill when spoken from a stage. I may think the West Virginia section of Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle* is hackneyed and stereotypical, but I also have to understand that her West Virginia contains neglect and abuse that mine does not. I find Lee Smith's use of country accents over the top and cringe-worthy, but my West Virginia is near the Pennsylvania border and does not contain that same southern twang. Silas House's version of Appalachia is sometimes sickly sweet, but sometimes mine is too. None of our work is without problems. All of us will continue to perpetuate some stereotypes, while we will also do our best to eradicate others. We will all do our best to tell our stories as truly as we can, and none of us will reach perfection. And I am okay with that. In fact, I am more than okay, I am ecstatic.

With the following creative chapters of my dissertation, I too join a varied group of Appalachian writers. Like Pancake and McClanahan, I too am from West Virginia, and my stories find a home there as well. In the process of writing the collection, I tried

to write the West Virginia I know without censoring myself. Upon returning to them with a more critical eye, I have now begun to ask myself how they undermine stereotypes or complicate the hillbilly, as well as how they may reinforce some stereotypes. I have considered whether they are West Virginia enough or if some of them are too rural. After writing and revising the preceding pages, I realized something: none of us is perfect. We will all write the West Virginia we know.

"Frackers," the first story in the collection, best exemplifies how my fiction does work similar to that of Pancake's and McClanahan's. Like their stories, "Frackers" responds to industrial exploitation in the area and builds upon preconceived notions of the hillbilly. Unlike their work, I examine a more recent industrial addition to West Virginia and Appalachia, hydraulic fracturing (fracking), and my "hillbilly" protagonist is female.

The story itself is based upon a personal experience in which I was confronted with the everyday effects of fracking. While driving through Wetzel County, West Virginia, I came upon a drill site and was blinded by the giant spotlights, barely able to see the road. This experience led me to consider the subtler but no less harmful effects of fracking. While there are concerns that this form of natural gas drilling poisons the groundwater and leaves the area vulnerable to earthquakes, the practice also causes everyday disruptions to the lives of people who live near these sites, including noise and light pollution, road blockages, traffic accidents, and roads damaged by the weight of trucks traveling to and from the drilling sites. I decided to explore the effects of just one of these: light pollution. In "Frackers," I explore one woman's response to this problem,

wondering how far a person will go when driven to desperation by an industrial concern over which she has no control. This is the plight of many people in this area who own the land but not the minerals beneath it.

On the one hand, Mabel can be interpreted as fitting within the category of the female hillbilly. With her white hair, work boots, quilted flannel, and proficiency with a gun, she most closely resembles "the bonneted, toothless crone who lives out her remaining years smoking a corncob pipe awash in a haze of melancholia" (Harkins 32-33). Though neither bonneted nor toothless, Mabel can be read as someone who is "awash in a haze of melancholia" in her refusal to sell the remainder of her land to the fracking company when she thinks of the generations of her family who have lived there. In fact, she refuses to spend the money she has received from the company because of her guilt. Also, while it is not quite a corncob pipe, she still enjoys sitting on the back porch "to smoke cigars and sip a nice scotch." These details, along with her sexless relationship with Dewey Trotts, all seem to place her firmly within the category of the aged female hillbilly. If these characteristics were all that comprised Mabel Jakes, she would be a stereotype, but her characterization is more complicated than this, especially in her response to the light pollution.

While the violence that Mabel practices may place her more firmly within the category of hillbilly, my goal is that her desperation will remove her from this role. The beginning of the story introduces Mabel's growing desperation, as the lights from the drill site shine into her bedroom window. Blackout curtains do not help, and she can see the lights even with her eyes closed. Also, Mabel first tries to fix the problem through

proper channels, lodging twelve complaints in six months without receiving a reply. All of this happens in backstory, and the actual story begins at her moment of desperation. In her first act against Marcellus Wells, she uses a bb gun to shoot out light bulbs, never intending to harm the people who work at the site. Even when the company brings out more lights, Mabel returns with her bb gun, again solely intending to burst the light bulbs. She only realizes that the stakes have been raised when she sees the fracking employees with guns slung over their shoulders. She even comments that her gun "wouldn't create more than a welt on a person's skin," reinforcing her lack of violent intent. The violence comes from the workers, when Mabel feels a burning sensation in her shoulder as she is hit with buckshot. Here, the impetus for the violence is placed firmly on the fracking company, even if it is the action of a few workers rather than a company-sanctioned act. By making the industry solely responsible for the violence, I try to undermine the idea that Mabel is the violent hillbilly. If the company line is that industry has a civilizing effect on the residents of Appalachia, this act undermines that claim. If violence is an act that lacks civility, something that only a hillbilly would do, Marcellus Wells becomes the hillbilly, placing Mabel above such an act.

When Mabel does finally plan to commit violence, it is not in the form of a hillbilly feud; instead, she and Dewey plot a suicide mission, another act that does not fit within the hillbilly trope. Before Dewey removes the buckshot from Mabel's shoulder, he chastises her for her actions, telling her, "They're going to get [your land] eventually anyway," to which Mabel replies, "I know." These words confirm that they have no control over what the company does or what happens to the very land they stand on. The

moment the drill site turns the lights back on becomes a time of reckoning for Dewey, and after staring into the blinding lights, the full realization of Mabel's situation sinking in, he says, "You know, I have a .30-.30." When Mabel makes sure he understands the implications of what he is saying, Dewey replies, "It's a hunting rifle." In this statement, their situation changes, as they become the hunters rather than the prey. In a historical sense, the people of Appalachia have always been the prey of industrial concerns intent on profit by any means necessary. Here, Mabel and Dewey are only inverting their roles. Even though their weapons can cause great harm, they know that their actions will not go unpunished. The employees at the site have already shown themselves willing to commit violence for a much less egregious offense, and they have greater numbers. Dewey and Mabel do not walk into this situation thinking anything will change; instead, they make this plan with the full knowledge that violence is the only act left that will receive any sort of response. Between the lights shining in the window and the buckshot embedded in Mabel's shoulder, the company has already won. The two characters can either let the company have its way, or they can fight to the end. Here, the act of fighting a losing battle with the full knowledge that they will die in the struggle shows the extent of their desperation: they are no longer fighting for their own wellbeing. Instead, they are encouraging a fight that may continue after they have given their lives. They walk toward their deaths with their eyes open, fighting industrial exploitation until the very end.

Through its response to industrial exploitation, "Frackers" is a distinctly West Virginia story that responds to events that are currently developing in the area. Because

of the discovery of natural gas pockets throughout north central West Virginia, fracking's everyday disruptions will only get worse, and the more serious concerns with earthquakes and poisoned ground water will soon play out. I wanted to write about the problems fracking creates as soon as I saw those blinding lights in Wetzel County, but I did not want to write an essay that only echoes what has already been said. Instead, I created Mabel and Dewey, two characters that, while fitting within some of the behavioral and visual tropes of the hillbilly, prove themselves to be anti-hillbillies, as they give their lives to fight the industrial exploitation that has begun anew in Appalachia.

Other stories rely on West Virginia as setting or the hillbilly trope in different ways. "Brickton Boys" plays with the idea of good ol' boys out for a fun evening full of football, beer, and pickup trucks. For the young men in this story, their fun takes a decidedly sinister turn, flipping readers' expectations. While the *Deliverance*-esque hillbilly may come into play in this story, my goal is that their youth, drunkenness, and attitudes will counteract any hints toward their deliberate evilness. "Muddin'" uses a decidedly rural activity, driving through mud and getting hung up, to force Bill and Chelle together to discuss their divorce and their current relationship with one another. This story was directly influenced by the death of Shain Gandy, the protagonist of *Buckwild*, the reality show previously mentioned in this chapter, as he died from carbon monoxide poisoning after his car's tailpipe was blocked while muddin'. Unfortunately, he was drunker than Bill and Chelle and did not realize the problem, which cost him and his two passengers their lives. While these stories rely upon rural activities that have

been stereotyped in different ways, I strove to complicate the representations of them by portraying them as having real world consequences. At the end of "Brickton Boys," Brandon has to decide whether he stands beside his new friends who were only out for fun or whether he too will bear the consequences for the pain he helped to cause. In "Muddin'," Chelle and Bill only come to a new understanding in their relationship because they were forced to spend the night together. If not for their drunken romp through the woods, they may have continued their inconsequential interactions. Through offering serious consequences for the characters' actions, these activities have taken on a sense of gravity in the stories, undermining their simplistic representations.

Other stories only vaguely hint at issues that affect West Virginia, such as poverty, untreated mental illness, and lice infestations, though most of these stories could take place in any impoverished area, not only within the confines of Appalachia. "The Dance," which takes place inside a junior high school gym, ignores much of the world of Appalachia, though Everett's poverty is a problem that exists throughout the region. In fact, I based characteristics of Everett's home on houses I have seen in my own hometown. Still, poverty like this exists everywhere; nothing makes it distinctly regional. The unnamed narrator in "The Dollar General" must deal with her mother's untreated mental illness, a problem that, while prevalent within West Virginia, is much bigger than this region. "Dirty Girl" explores a problem that exists at almost every school in America: lice infestations. In this story, I try to portray the stigma that goes with catching lice, especially in a poverty-stricken area like West Virginia, where lice can label a person as "dirty" for the rest of their schooling. In these stories, I strive to

show that some problems that arise in Appalachia are not distinctly Appalachian issues. Instead, some of the concerns that affect Appalachia are problems of poverty, rather than region.

Other stories are not necessarily "West Virginia stories" or even rural stories. "The Tattoo" mentions towns in West Virginia, but because most of it takes place in a restaurant and explores a couple's disingenuous relationship, Appalachian stereotypes do not come into play. "May Ours Be as Happy as Yours" also takes place in a restaurant, never even mentioning the region of the country in which the story takes place. "Controlled Fall" is set in a house and a grocery store and explores a woman's adult-onset blindness, none of which is distinctly Appalachian. I include these stories with other West Virginia stories to show that people there live lives much like people in the rest of the United States, confronting similar problems in similar ways. Not everything in the region revolves around poverty or hopelessness. Instead, people live in ways that are indistinguishable from lives in other regions of the US.

What makes my stories Appalachian is that all of them, whether mentioned or not, take place in and around Brickton, West Virginia, a fictional town I have created as an amalgamation of towns near where I grew up in north central West Virginia. While "Frackers" and a few others are decidedly Appalachian, others can be read as generally rural. Still others do not necessarily fit into the arena of "Appalachian fiction" as it exists today, and as far as I am concerned, that is a good thing. By offering these non-impoverished, non-hill country, non-hillbilly stories as Appalachian fiction, I am working to revise Appalachia. I am constructing a new West Virginia, one that includes

hillbillies and poverty and untreated mental illness and lice and scalp tattoos and pictures of dead people and divorce celebrations and muddin' and prisons and everything in between. While I do not want to erase Appalachia as a distinct region, I am working to erase its stigma as a home to only poor, white, hillbillies. And I do that the only way I know how: one story at a time.

CHAPTER II

FRACKERS

I've heard the stories: fracking is poisoning the ground water, it's causing earthquakes, my drinking water will soon be flammable, and so on. They don't hold a candle to the fat check I got from the Marcellus Wells people. What does keep me up at night is the damn lights. It seems fracking is a 24-hour business, and their lights point straight at my bedroom window. Picture it: four industrial lights, 1,000+ watts each, pointing at your house all night. And it doesn't really matter if I use blackout curtains or move to another room – there's no way to ignore the production happening just a quarter mile from my bedroom window. I can hear the workers yelling, the whine of machinery, the wrecks that sometimes happen because drivers are confused by the brightness. I can see the lights through closed eyelids.

It took six months and a dozen complaints met with stony silence before I got up one night at midnight and slid off my nightgown, replacing it with black pants and shirt, black shoes, my white hair tied up under a black hat. They wouldn't see me coming. I crouched behind trees and crawled across the field on my elbows, not taking a chance the workers would see me if they glanced in my direction. About fifty yards off, I lay on the ground, pulled the BB gun off my back, and aimed for center mass. There was a small ping and then a tinkle of broken glass as the first bulb burst. The men hadn't figured out what was going on before I'd shattered two more. I never got a chance with the final bulb. They'd realized what was happening and turned the light from my line of

sight. As their voices filled the night air, I crawled back to my house and slid into my bed without anyone realizing I'd been gone. It was the soundest I'd slept in months.

"Did you see anything?" everyone wanted to know at the Pantry Store the next morning. Word had traveled fast. I'd barely poured my coffee when I had a crowd of old timers around me. For at least twenty years, we'd all woken before the sun and made our way to the convenience store in the middle of town to sip coffee and trade stories before anyone else even thought about starting their day. The young girl behind the counter always had a fresh pot of coffee brewing by 5am, and I usually poured the first cup. Today, I was twenty minutes late, and the others had already drunk a full pot and taken most of the chairs.

"See any what?" I asked.

"The lights, Mabel," Dewey said. "Someone shot the lights out."

"Really?" I asked. "That must be why I overslept."

They all laughed. I'd been complaining about the lights since they'd started drilling, showing up at the Pantry Store sometimes as early as 3am, bags under my eyes, drinking cup after cup of coffee to stay awake.

Once, Dewey asked why I didn't just sell the rest of my land and move closer to town. Buy myself a nice little townhouse and enjoy my old age. I couldn't, though. My grandparents had built my house, and my family had lived on that land for generations. I didn't think it would bother me when I sold part of the land, but the money still sat in my bank account, untouched. I felt guilty for selling any of it. I would have given the money

back if they'd leave me alone, but I'd heard the gas deposit was big and deep, that soon enough they'd force me off my land completely. I wasn't going to let that happen.

"They're saying they were ambushed," Dewey added.

"Where you hearing all this, Dew?" someone called out.

"Garvin," he said. "My son got work with them. One of the few."

We nodded. No one spoke for a minute. When we'd first heard that Marcellus Wells was coming in, we thought we'd all be rich, and everyone would have a job. Turns out, those of us who owned land with gas deposits under it did get a nice lump of cash, but there weren't many new jobs for people in town. Instead, the company brought in workers from Texas and Oklahoma, people who'd spent their whole lives drilling for oil and gas. The only people who made any money were those who had an extra room to rent, and they could and did charge anything they wanted for a place to sleep. Everyone else in town was still waiting for the coal mines to call back workers from the most recent round of layoffs.

"Well, whoever did it is my hero," I said and sat in a chair that someone had vacated for me. I wrapped my hands around my cup of coffee to keep the chill off. Wearing work boots and a quilted flannel over my sweater, I still couldn't get warm. Summer had slipped away, and I wasn't used to the chill morning air. "I'm tired of those sons-a-bitches doing anything they want and getting away with it."

"Hear hear," Dewey said and sat down to my right. He'd had a thing for me ever since my husband Irwin died ten years earlier. Sometimes, I'd cook a rhubarb pie and bring it by his house. We'd eat it with cups of milk before moving to the back porch to

smoke cigars and sip a nice scotch, but it didn't go any further than that. After so much time alone, I think we were both too nervous. Dewey still had his son Garvin, but the boy didn't visit his dad as much as he should. He said he had his own wife and kids to attend to, and Dewey said he understood. My only daughter moved to Washington state ten years earlier and was lucky to make it back to West Virginia every couple years. We talked on the phone once a month, and we exchanged Christmas presents, but it wasn't the same as having someone with blood running through their veins and air moving in and out of their lungs sitting right beside you.

"The cops'll figure it out," I said, and everyone laughed. Our police were mostly kids not far out of high school who would give you a ticket for going 28 in a 25 but didn't seem to understand detective work.

"I'll stop by this evening," Dewey said. "We can sit on your porch and enjoy the night air."

"That'd be good," I said. "Real good." It had been a long time since I'd enjoyed an evening at home – too much light. But without the Marcellus people, the sunset on the hills behind my house was the prettiest you'd find in all of Marion County.

Conversations split off, each person offering a theory of who'd shot the lights out. Never once did my name come up. After all, I was 68 years old, and I was the one who'd sold the land to that damn company to begin with. Dewey put his hand over mine, and we listened to the yarns spin around us.

"Don't bother coming out," I said to Dewey over the phone that evening.

Just as the shadows had started to creep into crevices between the hills, a van had pulled up with five new lights. Even though it wasn't anywhere near dark, the workers had pointed them in my direction and turned them on.

I sat on my porch all evening facing them. If I shaded my eyes, I could see they had more men on site than usual, and a lot of them were milling around, keeping an eye on the hills around them, looking for saboteurs, no doubt.

I didn't go inside until there was no light other than their giant bulbs. I put the same clothes on as the night before and even covered my face with shoe polish I found in the pantry. By the time I walked out the back door, I blended perfectly with the darkness.

Instead of crouching for some of the trek across the field, I stayed on my stomach the whole way, pulling myself along with my elbows until I made it to the tall grasses near where they worked, away from the trees. All evening, they'd been looking toward the woods for a shooter, which made sense, as they offered the most cover, but I was smarter than them. I was right in thinking they wouldn't pay much attention to a tall stand of grass.

Once there, I stopped to catch my breath and rest a minute before commencing with my plan. I'd crawled the length of almost four football fields, and I could feel it in my whole body. I'd be sore in the morning. Sweat beaded on my face, and my breath was too ragged to take a good shot. Besides, even if I hit the lights, I still had to get back to my house without getting caught.

“Break,” I heard a man call and lifted my head. I watched as half the men milling around made their way to a trailer on the edge of the work site. As they walked through the door of the trailer, I noticed that most of them carried guns across their backs. My breath caught in my throat. All I had was a BB gun – it wouldn’t create more than a welt on a person’s skin.

I also realized I wouldn’t have a better chance than now. I aimed at the light farthest from me and heard a ping, metal on metal, but the light was still on. “Dammit,” I muttered and aimed again. None of the men had noticed what I was doing yet. I breathed deep and then let my breath out. At the moment my lungs were empty, I squeezed the trigger and watched as that light went black.

“Hey,” one of the men yelled, and then there was a jumble of sounds as the men gathered around that light, each looking in a different direction, many pulling guns to their shoulders and searching through their scopes. These men had hunted before, were good shots, used to killing dinner for their families.

While they were still confused, not quite sure where to look, I aimed at a second light and took it out too. “Over there!” a man yelled, and I looked to see him pointing in my direction. No clue how he’d seen me in the darkness, no muzzle flash on a BB gun, but he’d spotted me just the same.

I didn’t wait for them to come my way. I stood, hoped wearing full body black would hide me long enough to get away from them, at least far enough that no one could get a good shot off. I even ran in zig zags, liked I’d seen people do in movies, hoping they wouldn’t be able to keep me in their sights long enough.

I was almost far enough away that they wouldn't be able to get a good bead on me when I heard the crack of a shotgun, and my shoulder felt like it was on fire as buckshot buried itself in the meat of my flesh. I cried out, almost fell, but I didn't. I dropped the BB gun, useless to me now, and ducked low as I ran toward my house.

Even in that much pain, I wasn't stupid enough to climb the steps to my front door. Instead, I ran around my house and down the stairs into the basement. There, I made my way upstairs and into my kitchen. I dropped into a chair at the table and let myself feel the full force of the buckshot in my shoulder.

I laid my head on the table and maybe blacked out for a second, then let myself cry a few tears before pulling it together. I reached for the phone and stopped. I couldn't call 911, couldn't go to the hospital. I took a deep breath, picked up the phone, and dialed Dewey.

"You have to come over here right now," I said.

"What's going on?" he asked, sleep in his voice. I looked at the clock above the sink. It was one in the morning.

"Now," I said again. "Hurry, Dewey. I need you."

"I'll be right there," he said.

I hung up the phone and laid my forehead on the table. I practiced keeping the breath moving in and out of my mouth evenly. Blood ran down my arm, pooled in my lap, but I didn't look at my shoulder. I wiggled my toes, the fingers on my good hand, and paid attention to staying conscious until Dewey arrived.

“What the hell happened?” he asked once he’d forced the lock on my door and made his way into my kitchen.

“I got shot,” I said. I turned my head and smiled at him as much as I could.

“No shit,” he said. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“No,” I said. “No hospital.”

“What do you expect me to do then?”

“Fix it,” I said.

“I can’t.”

“You have to.”

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

I listened as he pulled supplies off shelves in the bathroom, grabbed towels from the linen closet, before he lifted me from the table. I cried out, but he kept moving until he laid me face down on my bed. Sweat poured from my face and mixed with the tears leaking from my eyes.

“Let’s see what you did to yourself,” he said and took a pair of scissors to my jacket. He cut quickly and then pulled the cloth from my skin more slowly. Where the blood had already started to clot, the shirt had dried to my skin. When he tried to pull it, I moaned, and Dewey soaked the fabric in water until it was soft enough to remove. Slowly, he took the clothes from my upper body and washed away the worst of the blood.

“It could be worse,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

"If you'd been closer, I'd have to take you to the hospital. As it is, you only have a handful of buckshot sprinkled in your shoulder. I should be able to get it out."

"Let me see," I said.

"You sure?"

"There are a couple hand mirrors in the bathroom."

He returned with two mirrors. He laid one beside my head, and I forced myself up on my good arm. "Easy," he said. "You'll make it bleed more." He held up the other mirror, and I could see the holes in my back, just a few of them. They looked tiny, too small to cause so much pain and blood. My face looked silly now, smeared in shoe polish, and the bed around me was covered in blood. I'd have to burn the mattress.

"I need to dig out the buckshot," Dewey said. "It'll hurt. Bad."

I nodded and handed him the mirror. I laid my face on the bed again. "There's rubbing alcohol in the pantry, and my tweezers are in my makeup bag."

While he was gone, there was a knock on the door. "Who're you?" I heard the man ask.

"Dewey Trotts."

"Where's the lady who lives here?"

"She's sick," Dewey said. "In bed. I've been taking care of her all night."

"Did either of you see what happened?" the man asked.

Dewey said something I couldn't hear.

But the man replied loud and clear, explaining that someone had shot out their lights.

"We've been inside all night," Dewey said. "Haven't seen a thing."

"How do I know the woman who lives here didn't do it and you're hiding her? Would you mind if I come in?"

"Mabel Jakes is 68 years old," Dewey said. He sounded angry. Dewey was old, but he was still big, and when he got mad, you never forgot that he played football when he was in school, even if that had been fifty years ago. "If you think she could do what you're saying, you're the one with problems, boy. And if you think you're coming in this house, you'd better get a few guys to help you."

The door slammed, and I felt Dewey's footsteps as he stomped back to my room.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" he asked.

"I couldn't sleep," I said. "I was up half the night, every night. Last night's the first good sleep I've had since they started drilling."

"You sold them the land," he said. He sat on the edge of the bed. I cringed as the mattress gave beneath me.

"I didn't know they'd make my life hell," I said. "I'd give them their money back if they'd just go away."

"You know they won't do that. Word is, they want to buy you out completely. There's another layer of shale with an even bigger gas deposit. You could sell them the whole damn place."

"You know I can't," I said. "It's been in my family forever. My momma would die all over again if she knew how much I've given up already."

"They're going to get it eventually anyway," he said.

"I know."

"Then you're just being crazy." He dumped the rubbing alcohol on the tweezers.

"What would you do?" I asked. "Give up? Crawl away with your tail between your legs? You know you wouldn't. Besides, didn't you hear everyone at the Pantry Store?"

"You can't fight them alone," Dewey said. "Jesus, Mabel, you've got to think of yourself."

"I *am* thinking of myself," I said.

At that moment, the lights came on again, their beams cutting across my yard, through the windows, and into Dewey's eyes. Sweat shone on his face.

He was silent, staring into the lights a minute before speaking. "You know, I have a .30-30," he said.

"That's a big gun."

"It's a hunting rifle."

"That changes the whole game," I said. "I was just aiming at their lights."

"They changed the game first," he said, "when they started shooting old ladies."

"Where's the gun?"

"It's in the truck."

"I still have Irwin's .30-06."

"How's your aim?"

"I just spent two nights shooting out light bulbs," I said. "What do you think?"

"Then I guess we're ready," he said and sighed.

"You know, you don't have to do this," I said.

He looked at the lights and then back at me, still sprawled across the mattress, my shoulder covered in tiny holes. "Yes," he said. "I do."

CHAPTER III

A ROOM WITH A DOOR*

The fence went up in ‘91 or ‘92, and the reason we needed it changes depending on who you ask. Some say that before the fence, we would walk into downtown Morgantown, drink at the bars with the undergrads, then crawl back to our units before morning count. But that doesn’t make sense. If the fence were here to keep us in, there wouldn’t be so many gaps in it. Others claim that after the neighborhood grew up around the prison camp, people started crossing through rather than walking around. Sometimes, when people got drunk late at night, they’d walk through the middle of our compound and pass out. Guards would find them in the morning. We’ve also heard that before we wore uniforms, the neighborhood women would get in line with us for dinner and eat a free meal on the federal government’s dime.

Whatever the reason, the fence has been up over twenty years now, and we could walk through it anytime we want, but no one does. Or almost no one. The guards say, “Go. See if I care. I won’t even chase you.” That’s right, they won’t. Instead, they’ll call the federal marshals, who’ll pick us up on the side of the road and tack another five years to our sentence.

Mostly, it’s better just to stay here and make the best of it. Janie Moss got her GED inside. A few other women can cut hair so good they’ll have no trouble getting jobs when they’re out. Besides, the food’s not half bad, and you don’t have to worry

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about paying the rent. If you have a family, it can get pretty rough, and if you're from out of state, it's worse. But it doesn't even look like a prison here, more like a college campus, what with the manicured lawns and greenhouse. Not that we're allowed to walk on the grass – that'll get us a shot, a write-up they look at when deciding whether we qualify for early release. We don't get to eat the food they grow in the greenhouse either, but it's nice to know something thrives here.

Really, though, it's the noise that gets to you. Picture it: 600 women, half in each unit. That's 300 women in one giant room with two tiers. No doors on our bunks, no bars either, though sometimes we wish there were. Girls sticking their heads in when you want to be alone, guards poking through your locker whenever they want. 300 women, half of them talking at any one time. It's a dull roar, though no one's yelling. Even at night, it doesn't quiet down. Some snore, others cough in their sleep. Guards walk the floor, their shoes clacking against the concrete, whistling to pass the time. Small noises echo off stone walls. You can't even take a piss to get away from it. You think the bathroom will be quiet in the middle of the night, and you walk in to see four legs under a stall door instead of two, both women moaning. It's enough to drive you mad. By the end of our time here, all any of us really wants is peace and quiet. A room with a door and a little silence. Which isn't asking too much.

We all go a little crazy in here, but Sandy Weston's the only one who's ever done anything about it. Really, this is her story, but she's not here to tell it. She's been gone since '98.

Sandy was in for drugs, though you wouldn't know it to look at her. She didn't have the rotten teeth or pock marks of a meth head, and she didn't have track marks either. When she talked about it, all she said was that she fucked up. "I don't know what good it does to keep me in here," she added. "They could have slapped an ankle bracelet on me and left me in Florida." Instead, they'd dragged her to West Virginia with promises of placing her in RDAP, the drug rehab unit, but when she got here, she pissed clean, and they said she didn't have enough proof she was an addict, even with the drug conviction. Then they kept her here, and all her friends in Florida forgot about her, and if she had any family, they never did come see her. So, while the rest of us crowded around for mail call at 6:00, Sandy got one of the good seats in front of the TV and watched the news if they played it or reruns of Jeopardy if the guards blacked the news out that night, which could happen for any number of reasons but usually meant that a former guard was being indicted for sleeping with inmates or bringing in contraband.

Sandy wasn't sad the way some people are when the outside world forgets about them. She said she could even get along inside if she just had a little quiet. "Hell," she said, "I even like West Virginia." She said it wasn't as humid as Florida, and you got a view. "I could live here," she said. "In Morgantown, not prison. I could be happy here, if I could just hear my own thoughts."

The prison is in the middle of a rundown neighborhood on the outskirts of Morgantown, but the town's surrounded by hills covered in trees that turn red and orange and yellow in the fall, blazing for a good month before the leaves die and snow blankets everything you see.

Janie was from the area and said, “I might stay here when I get out. It’s a good town.” That was just talk. Janie had a fifteen-year sentence, but we didn’t remind her that she’d still be here long after most of us were gone. Janie told us she was married, or divorced, or widowed. She either had no kids or five. When she got out, she either had a huge family to return to or no one. Sometimes, if we got bored, we’d ask Janie to tell us about her life, never knowing which story she’d share. Janie liked to embellish the truth. She said Morgantown was home, when she’d grown up fifty miles south. None of her lies hurt anyone, and we figured they were just a way to pass the time. People liked her as long as they took her tales with a grain of salt.

“We could get a house,” Sandy said to her. “Roommates.”

The two women made plans, decided they’d have a two bedroom house with a giant porch and turn their entire front yard into a flowerbed that Janie would plant each spring. They settled on marigolds because their oranges and reds blazed like the leaves on the trees in the fall. They were just pipe dreams, but their plans helped to pass the time. Janie wanted a dog, and Sandy said it should be a golden retriever. They decided to name it Rudy and buy it a red collar that would match the color they planned to paint their house.

“It’ll happen,” Janie said when anyone pointed out that Sandy would be out years before her, long enough to start a life and forget all her prison promises, which never mean much on the outside anyway. “You just watch.”

It was a Wednesday morning, and someone had snitched to a guard that there were two cell phones floating around the unit. As soon as count was over, they told us to

sit on the floor, backs against the wall. For the next two hours, we watched as they emptied our lockers, checked extra uniforms for hidden pockets, and pulled our four-inch thick mattresses from the metal stands that were bolted to the walls. They snaked toilets and threatened to strip search us. For their trouble, the guards found ten cartons of cigarettes, a bottle of diet pills, hair bleach, and a bottle of nail polish. Even our contraband was boring. The whole time, we cat-called the guards when their backs were turned, whistled under our breaths, and mumbled to our neighbors. When the noise level got too high, the guards yelled for us to shut up, and we would quiet down, but the din never ended. It just got muffled for a few minutes before the volume rose again.

One by one, they patted us down before we could leave for lunch, our entire morning wasted. Every time they had to stop to lead a woman off for a strip search, Sandy lost it a little. The room got louder, and people didn't even pretend to be quiet. "You're treating us like prisoners!" someone yelled from the back of the line, which got a burst of laughter. Others called out comments, hoping for another round of giggles, but pretty soon yells overlapped, and sounds bounced around the room, filling every corner and crack. Sandy squatted on the floor, hands over her ears, eyes squeezed shut. Her lips moved silently. No one noticed her for a while, and once we did, no one bothered her. As the line moved forward, we walked around her, careful not to get too close.

People lose it in here sometimes. Not like in the movies where one inmate stabs another with a sharpened toothbrush or attacks a guard. We're not violent. Sometimes there are fights, but that's usually over a woman stealing someone's girlfriend or ratting another person out for contraband. When we can't deal with this place anymore, we do

like Sandy: sink down on our heels, rock back and forth, and pretend prison is a bad dream. Or refuse to get out of bed for days until one of our roommates complains to a guard because we're beginning to smell. If we are violent, it's only toward ourselves.

As the last inmate left, Sandy was still huddled on the floor, and she probably got her moment of silence, but the guards wouldn't have let her stay there long. They wanted lunch too.

Later, we heard Sandy was in the SHU, segregated housing. The women who'd been caught with contraband were there too and said they heard crying coming from her cell, but by the time she was back in gen pop the next day, you'd never have guessed she'd been gone. That's the way it is – if you have to lose it, that's fine. Have your meltdown. But don't let it last too long. Instead, you break a little, let the tears come out of the cracks you've formed, and then seal them back up before anyone gets the idea to ship you out. We have it good here, as far as prisons go. If you get shipped, chances are it won't be to a place so good. There, the fence won't have gaps, and the leaves will turn brown and wither, if there are trees at all.

Those of us here long enough to remember Sandy swear she wasn't different the day after her meltdown. Even people who weren't here then claim she ate breakfast and didn't complain when she went to work. All we have are stories, and we share them. Sometimes we borrow a story and make it ours. It's about survival. An inmate who was here then said Sandy swept the floors in cosmetology like it was any other day. Maybe she was quieter than usual, or she could have been more withdrawn, but no one saw any

reason to worry. People retreat inside themselves all the time, and it takes more than covering your ears with your hands before anyone worries.

No one saw her at lunch, but Janie Moss swore Sandy returned to the unit in the afternoon. Janie said Sandy took a nap, but none of us really believed that. We all tell tall tales, but you've got to make sure yours rings true, and the idea of Sandy lying down for the afternoon doesn't fit with what happened after. We shrugged Janie's claim off, like we did most of what she said.

It wasn't until 4pm count that anyone noticed something was wrong. First, a guard called Sandy over the intercom, and we knew she'd get a shot if she didn't report. Then, we were all recalled to our units. The guards never had found the rumored cell phones, and we groaned at the thought of another search. They had us line up for another count. They were one short.

It's not like in the movies where the siren goes off and guards take off running while we're locked into our cells. In real life, guards searched the compound first. Then, when they didn't find Sandy, they called the marshals, like they said they would. We aren't in here for murder or battery. Those inmates have fences with razor wire and guard towers. We're drug mules and embezzlers. The only thing we could do on the outside is get high or take someone's money. The only thing Sandy's escape would cause is a lot of paperwork.

We whispered for a couple days. After all, Sandy was three years through a five-year sentence. She'd made it over the hump, and when they caught her, she'd pay with another five tacked onto the end. We never considered they wouldn't pick her up. She

wouldn't come back to our camp – they'd take her somewhere worse, where she couldn't slip out through the gaps in the fence.

Some said she'd gone to the loading docks after lunch and slipped around the back of a delivery truck. Others claimed she'd snuck through a hole in the fence near cosmetology. But Janie Moss claimed she walked through the front gate, head up, shoulders back, not even pretending to hide. Back then, everyone laughed at Janie, but now, hers is the version we tell new people, especially when they show off, pretend they didn't freeze up and confess every sin they'd ever committed when the marshals ganged up on them in interrogation. We say, "Sandy had more guts than you ever thought of having."

Of course, we assumed she'd been picked up, that she got a day or two on the outside at most. We hoped she'd found someplace quiet to hole up, that she soaked in enough silence to last her the next seven years. And we never would have known any different, as the guards never said another word about her.

But a few weeks after the great escape, once everyone stopped talking about Sandy because there was nothing new to add, Janie said, "I saw Sandy, and you'll never guess where." Nothing better to do, we followed her behind the greenhouse, and she pointed beyond the prison fence to a little house with a porch wider than the building and broken windows covered with garbage bags. "She's in there," Janie said. There was no sign of movement.

"No way," another woman said.

"Wait," Janie said. "She'll come out."

We waited. Because what else did we have to do? Prison time is spent watching the calendar, getting through each day the best we can until they tell us we can go home. Staring at a house until someone came out would cross a few more minutes off our sentences.

There were probably ten of us there that day, though to hear the same story a year later, there were fifty, all squatted down behind the greenhouse. If anyone in the neighborhood had come outside, they would have wondered what the hell was going on – grown women staring at an empty house. But no one else on the street was home, or no one cared. Nice neighborhoods don't sprout up around prisons. Here, rent's low, and the houses are old and falling apart. The families get food stamps and send their kids to school for free lunch.

We sat there for almost an hour, our knees cramping up, ready to laugh at Janie, sure this was another of her lies. Then, the door opened, and a woman stepped out. She had Sandy's brown hair, but it was cut short. Tall and too thin, knees and elbows knobby – just like Sandy. She looked in our direction, but her eyes traveled over and past us.

"Sandy," Janie whispered.

It was. Sandy, wearing shorts and a tank top, sweeping the front porch, then taking a paint scraper to the banister, scraping the old away and making it fresh again.

We didn't move. Didn't breathe. We watched her for an hour until she put the scraper down and walked back inside without even glancing at us.

By lights out, every woman on the compound knew Sandy was living across the street. A few tried to tell the guards, but they waved us away. "You don't need to worry

about Sandy," they said. "She's already taken care of." Most women believed them and chalked her sighting up to being another one of Janie's tall tales. The guards must have thought so too, because they never were suspicious of the stories. Instead, they rolled their eyes, Janie's lies legendary.

The next day, a group of us took our knitting behind the greenhouse, and our needles clicked as we stared at the house. "Why there?" a few of the guards asked, suspicious, and we said it was quieter there than anywhere else on the compound. Aside from the women working in the greenhouse or in the gardens outside, it was mostly silent. After a week or so, the guards stopped asking questions and just did a regular sweep through the area to make sure we weren't sneaking cigarettes or drugs. It was a perfect spot for someone in a car to toss contraband over the fence, but we wouldn't have ruined such a good place. We were never sure if the guards suspected what we were really up to, but we couldn't ask. Instead, we created a knitting club that met every morning behind the greenhouse. We left for meals and again for count, and some of us had to go to work or attend classes, but all day long, a group of us sat there and knitted blankets and scarves to send home or sell to other inmates.

We never reacted when Sandy came out, but we watched her every move. Already, she'd stripped most of the paint from the front of the house, and restacked the cinder blocks that made up the stairs. There were even a couple of lawn chairs on the porch, and sometime during the day, Sandy walked out and sat in one. She lit a cigarette and stared at us, but she never waved or smiled. We never called her name or tried to get

her attention. We watched. When she ground out her cigarette butt, she stood and went inside.

Sandy's routine never changed, and neither did ours. Prison life is one of waiting. You wait for lunch, for count, for quiet, for freedom. Sandy finished scraping her house and painted it red. She replaced the windows and planted a flowerbed full of marigolds each spring. After a few years, she put a new mailbox up, a miniature of her own house that she must have had specially made. Another few years, and she added black shutters to the house and bird feeders to the trees. She still smoked cigarettes on her porch, and we still watched her. A couple years ago, Sandy stopped dying her hair, and it grew out a pretty shade of silver.

Over the years, who we are has changed. A lot of the women who were here the day she escaped have been released, and a few have died. The space behind the greenhouse is the official spot for the knitting and crochet club, and the grass is worn away from our years of watching. When a new girl comes in and talks about escape, we point to Sandy. "She did it," we say, "and she did it with class." A lot of people here now have never heard of Sandy or her escape. Not everyone makes it into the club.

Recently, a car pulled up in front of Sandy's house just as the sun was setting, while she smoked her cigarette, and we watched as a woman stepped out. There were only three of us still left in prison from the day Sandy escaped. Janie had been released just months earlier, though the rest of the people from that day had been gone for years.

The woman ascended the stairs. She wore red heels the same shade as the house, but a hat hid her face. No one moved, not us or Sandy. The woman sat down in the other

chair on the porch, the one that Sandy had put there years before but had always stood empty. She took a cigarette from Sandy's pack and lit it. If they talked, we couldn't hear them, and they didn't look at each other. Instead, they smoked and looked in our direction, though both faces were lost in shadows.

When she finished her cigarette, the woman ground it out and stood. Sandy did too and took a step toward her. They hugged, one of those embraces where you hold onto the other person like you'll drown if it ends. Then, the woman let go. She stepped off the porch. We waited for her to get in the car, but she popped the trunk and pulled out a suitcase. Sandy opened the front door, and light fell on both their faces. Sandy's lack of surprise at her arrival, the extra chair that looked like it had always been waiting for her all these years – it made sense. The new woman was Janie. We watched them both step through the door, and then they were gone.

We turned and walked back to our units, to the world as we knew it, where the guards wouldn't yell when our voices rose, where they wouldn't stop the whispers moving between us. The guards would let us have our stories. They always have. They know we need them.

CHAPTER IV

BRICKTON BOYS

The Brickton Bobcats won the football game, and most of the fans had already left the muddy parking lot. But Brandon was still there, cold and wet, his shoes soaked through and covered in mud. He stood behind Charlie, wishing he'd accepted his parents' offer to pick him up. Brandon had assumed they'd go to the football game and then hang out at McDonald's, making a mess with ketchup packets until they got kicked out. Or go to the movies where they'd make out with girls in the back row for a couple hours. Instead, he was surrounded by a group of beefy guys who seemed to think terrorizing other teens was a fun Friday night.

"I don't think you know where you are," Charlie said to a boy with acne-scarred cheeks.

"I didn't mean to cause any trouble," the boy said, already backing toward his beat up Toyota Corolla.

"This is Brickton," Charlie said and stepped forward. "You made trouble by coming here."

Charlie's friends stepped forward with him, but Brandon hung back. He was willing to stand by his new friend, but he hadn't signed up for a fight. The other boys didn't say anything, so Charlie took another step toward the Toyota driver and his friends. "You don't belong here," he said.

Charlie was no bigger than the driver of the Toyota, maybe a couple inches shorter even, but he'd win if it came to blows. Where the other boy cowered, Charlie never wavered. Neither did the guys around him. Brandon straightened his shoulders and stepped forward, joining the others.

"You should leave now," Charlie said.

The boy and his friends turned and ran. They barely had the doors to the Toyota closed when the driver spun out of the muddy lot.

"You don't need to be a bully, Charlie," his girlfriend said. She'd pushed herself to the front of the group as soon as the Toyota started.

"Maybe I want to." Charlie laughed.

"Let's just go to the café and hang out," she said. She turned to her friends. "Anyone else hungry?"

The other girls nodded. "I have room in my car if anyone needs a ride," one said, and Brandon could swear she was looking at him.

"I could use a burger," he said.

"What are you, chicken shit?" one of Charlie's friends asked.

"We go there all the time," Charlie said. "I'm gonna teach those pussies a lesson."

"They didn't do anything," his girlfriend said. She sighed when Charlie ignored her and pulled out her compact. Brandon had never seen anyone wear so much makeup. When she put on her lipstick he couldn't look away – she started with a pencil that

outlined her lips, then switched between three different tubes of lipstick to fill in the color.

Charlie ignored her and turned to Brandon. “You can hang with the girls. Wouldn’t want you to get your panties in a bunch.”

A few of the guys snickered, and Brandon felt his face turn red. Charlie turned to the rest of the group and said, “Let’s go.”

They jumped in the back of Charlie’s truck, and Brandon scrambled to catch up. If he failed tonight, Charlie would never speak to him again.

Brandon was new in Brickton. His dad had been transferred and moved the whole family to West Virginia. At his previous school, Brandon had been one of the popular kids. He’d played baseball and dated a cheerleader. He figured Brickton would be the same, but in the past month he’d learned differently. No one knew that he played baseball – it was October. Besides, the cheerleaders dated football players, and Brandon wasn’t allowed to play. His parents said they didn’t want him to end up with brain damage. For the past six weeks of school, it seemed like no one had noticed Brandon. Then, in home room on Monday, Charlie said, “You live down the road from me, right? In the Underwood place?” He’d offered Brandon a ride to tonight’s game.

Everyone yelled and laughed, and someone opened a cooler in the bed of the truck and started passing beers around. Pretty soon, Brandon almost felt like one of them, yelling and hollering and drinking semi-cold beer as they bounced down side roads in their hunt for the Toyota. When they spotted it, a roar went up among the guys, and Charlie sped to catch up.

The boys in the back of the truck whooped and hollered when the truck's bumper tapped the back of the car they were chasing. The Toyota fishtailed, and Charlie braked and gave the little car room to recover before riding its ass. Everyone cheered and urged Charlie to hit the car again, but Brandon stayed quiet. He watched in horror as the guy beside him drained the last of his beer and then lobbed the empty bottle at the car. It smashed against the back window, and the others began pelting the car with their own bottles, some still full of beer.

"What's your problem, faggot?" Brandon looked up to see a bearded face staring him down. Brandon shook his head and looked away, but the guy shoved him and said, "I'm talking to you, pussy."

Brandon almost fell over, but he grabbed the roof of the cab to steady himself. "Me?" he said.

"You see any other faggots here?"

Brandon didn't have to look around to know that the others looked like this man – beefy, wearing Carhartt jackets with work boots, too much facial hair for normal teenagers. Brandon wasn't even sure they were in high school. One of them wore what looked like a wedding ring. Brandon was odd man out – his Nike high tops and Under Armour sweatshirt might have been cool at his old school, but not with these people. They'd be more impressed with camouflage hunting pants and a Marlboro hat.

Brandon looked at the beer bottle he'd been sipping from since he first got in the truck. He gripped the neck and hurled it at the car. It burst against the back window, beer and bits of glass everywhere. "No faggots here," he said.

The bearded man stared at him, and Brandon forced himself not to look away even though his heart was beating too fast and he could feel sweat running down his sides. Then, the guy smiled and slapped him on the back. “Not bad, little man,” he said. “Not too bad.” The others whooped again, and Brandon forced himself to join them.

But for him at least, all the fun had ended when they bumped the Toyota. He wondered how far Charlie would go. “You scared him,” Brandon called through truck’s rear window. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Hell no,” Charlie said and sped up again. “Don’t be a pussy.” This time, they hit the car harder, and one of its taillights shattered.

Brandon sat on the giant toolbox in the bed of the truck and held on for dear life.

“Listen, kid,” the bearded man said, leaning down and grabbing Brandon’s shoulder. “They could have gone home. Then, none of this would have happened. It’s their fault.”

“They were here for the football game,” Brandon said. “Just like us.”

“That’s not the point,” the guy said. “They had a choice. When they left the field, they could have driven home. But look where we are – in Brickton. They’re the ones who decided they weren’t leaving.”

Brandon nodded, but his heart sank. If the boys in the Toyota had turned right when they exited the lot, they’d have been on their way home. Instead, they had turned left, toward Brickton proper.

The little card sped up, and its motor whined louder. Brandon wanted to tell the people in it to slow down, to be careful. He wasn’t sure what Charlie would do to them if

their car's motor blew. The Toyota slid in gravel and pinged off the guardrail as it took a quick left, but it didn't stop. The truck followed, but Charlie slowed a bit for the turn, and the Toyota gained ground. Brandon breathed a sigh of relief. He wished Charlie's truck would blow a tire and end the chase.

"Look at them," someone said and pointed at the car. A passenger in the Toyota leaned out the window and tossed a beer bottle back at the truck. It smashed against the top of the cab and burst. Brandon covered his face but felt the spray of beer and glass hit him.

"Fuck you," the others called and started throwing whatever they could find at the car. They started with their beer bottles, then leaned down and grabbed random stuff from the bottom of the truck. One person tossed a bucket, and someone else lobbed a handful of gravel. Brandon stayed seated on the toolbox and didn't get up even when someone motioned him to move. The bearded man pulled Brandon up by the hood of his sweatshirt. "What the fuck's wrong with you, kid?"

Brandon looked down and saw the others were pulling tools from the box and hurling them at the car. First, a few socket wrenches, then a screwdriver. Brandon's mouth moved, but he couldn't speak. The guy with the beard still had ahold of him. He reached down into the toolbox and came up with a hammer. "Here," he said. "Make yourself useful."

The hammer had real weight to it. Brandon stared at it before looking up to see everyone watching him. He gripped the hammer and turned toward the car. He swung his arm around and shut his eyes as he released it, but that didn't stop the sound of

breaking glass from reaching his ears. Brandon opened his eyes and watched in horror as the Toyota swerved across the road and sideswiped a parked car before the driver regained control. The guys around him cheered and slapped Brandon on the back.

"Stop throwing my tools, assholes," Charlie yelled out the cab's back window. "My dad'll fucking kill me." Then he looked at Brandon and smiled. "Nice one," he said and turned back to the road.

The truck turned off the main road. The others knew to brace themselves, but Brandon was thrown to the floor. Charlie chased the Toyota up a steep gravel hill. The others were whooping and hollering in a frenzy of excitement. They were banging on the roof of the truck's cab, yelling, and tossing trash at the car.

Charlie tailed the Toyota for a while, but where the gravel ran out and the road turned to mud, he screeched to a halt and jumped out of the truck. "What's going on?" Brandon asked. Charlie stuck his arms in the air and whooped in victory. Everyone jumped up and down, danced around the truck, and pumped their fists in the air. "What's happening?" Brandon asked.

"Take a look, buddy boy," someone said.

"Where's the car?" Brandon asked.

"Who the fuck cares?" another person yelled.

"Chill," Charlie said. "It's right there, dumbass. Stuck in the mud for the rest of time." He waved his arm toward the woods, but Brandon couldn't see anything in the darkness.

Their own truck sat on the edge of the gravel. If Charlie hadn't stopped when he had, they would be stuck too.

A new round of beers was passed around, and the guys crowed in delight as they chugged their drinks. Brandon held his beer but barely sipped it. He didn't see any movement in the direction Charlie pointed.

"You know what this means, buddy?" Charlie asked and threw his arm over Brandon's shoulder. "This means we win." He tightened his grip around Brandon and rubbed his knuckles across the top of his head. Brandon squirmed out of the hold.

"Win?"

"They're not getting out of there," Charlie said and started laughing. He grabbed another beer and chugged it too.

"You hear that?" someone asked.

"What?"

"Shhh. Listen."

Everyone fell silent, but there was only the noise of crickets chirping and leaves rustling. There was no sound from the car, only empty air all around them. "Guess someone should have warned them it gets muddy up here," Charlie said, and they all laughed again.

A drunk in the back of the truck stood and said, "Wait. Let's have a little more fun."

He bent over the toolbox and came back up with a chainsaw in his hands. He pulled the crank cord, and the saw whirred to life.

"Someone give me a hand," he said, and everyone but Brandon stepped forward.

Brandon stood back and watched the others take turns with the saw. At first, everyone cheered, but it took longer to cut down a tree than they'd expected. Soon, the guys were bored, and just a couple people took over sawing at the trunk.

There was still no sound from the Toyota, and the truck's lights were pointed away from it, so Brandon didn't know if there'd been any movement. When no one was looking, he made his way to the toolbox and looked inside. There were all sorts of tools he'd never seen before, as well as lengths of rope and a cordless drill. He dug deeper and found a small flashlight that he shoved in his pocket. He continued searching but heard wood splitting and looked up to see the walnut tree fall and crash on the road a foot or two in front of the truck. Branches scraped the truck's hood, and Brandon felt the impact of the tree's weight in his feet. He jumped down from the truck.

Charlie came over to Brandon and grinned. "They're fucked now."

"What do you mean?" Brandon asked.

"Do you know how far from town we are?" Charlie asked. His eyes were glassy with drink.

"Not really."

"Ten miles," Charlie said. "Maybe more."

Brandon nodded.

"Even if they do get that car out of the mud, they're still not driving back to town." Charlie laughed. "They'll learn," he said. "They'll learn. You don't fuck with

me." He stepped closer to the truck, stuck his middle finger in the air, said, "No one fucks with Brickton boys."

Brandon looked at the finger, then at Charlie's face. It was hard, mean.

The others laughed and danced around the felled tree. They said, "Those mother fuckers'll learn," then yelled toward the car, "Hope you have a nice walk," and, "You're in so much shit," before they jumped back in the truck.

"Get your ass up here," someone called to Brandon.

He looked at the faces in the truck and then toward the darkness. He only had a few seconds while Charlie turned the truck around. Brandon switched on the flashlight and pointed it in the direction he'd last seen the Toyota. At first, he only saw an empty car. Then, the boys' heads popped up inside. They were hiding, but they were alive. Brandon breathed a sigh of relief. Then, one boy raised his head enough for Brandon to see that his face was covered in blood. Already, it was swollen and hard to see what all was broken, but the boy had to be in some serious pain. He waved his arm, as though calling for help. Brandon turned off his flashlight and jumped back in the truck.

"See you later, fuckers," one of the guys yelled. Some of the others cheered, but most of them were already winding down for the night. Everyone sat down in the bed of the truck as they made their way back to town. The others jostled him as they tried to find a spot out of the wind, but Brandon didn't say anything. He curled up and crossed his arms over his chest, letting the icy air hit his face. It was ten miles to town, a thirty-minute drive on gravel roads. If Brandon called 911 as soon as Charlie dropped him off, an ambulance could be back out here in an hour. A police officer would come to

Brandon's house to question him. He wondered if he'd be arrested. After all, he hadn't stopped them, and he did throw the hammer. The truck's headlights illuminated the road directly in front of them, but the rest of the world was cloaked in darkness. The boys around him closed their eyes, and one even started snoring, but Brandon kept his eyes open, alert to whatever lay ahead.

CHAPTER V

FAT BOTTOMED GIRLS

Someone plays Queen's "Fat Bottomed Girls" on the jukebox, and the diner's kitchen door swings open to reveal a three hundred pound woman wearing pasties, a g-string, and knee-high boots. "Surprise!" she says to Ramsey, who sits on a stool decorated with balloons. Her hair is teased into poufs of blonde, and it looks like she's put her makeup on with a spatula, eyelashes like spiders, eyeliner that ends at her temples, her mouth a smear of red lipstick. Karen, the day manager, grabs Ramsey by the shoulder and says, "Something to remind you of what's waiting for you at home."

The stripper is nothing like Anne Marie, Ramsey's fiancé, who encouraged him to come to this bachelor party. "They really want to give you a big send-off," Anne Marie said. "The least you can do is show up." Now he's here, watching everyone laugh as the stripper shoves one man's face after another into her cleavage. Ramsey would rather be at home with Anne Marie, playing poker for nickels or watching a movie, his head cradled in her breasts while she massages his scalp. Instead, he's half drunk on rum and coke in the diner where he spends most of his days. His employees shrink in their seats when the stripper comes near them, willing to pretend but hoping they don't have to. Karen, the day manager, stands behind the ring of chairs, out of reach.

She is tall and bony, with a frown on her face more often than not. It's her fault Ramsey sits here, waiting for the night to be over. When he told her he didn't want a bachelor party, she said it was only because he didn't know anyone who could get him

what he wants. “I know you,” she said. “You have weird tastes, but I’ll plan the perfect party.” That’s what he was afraid of, Karen’s idea of what he really liked. Knowing her, it would be embarrassing, and so far, Ramsey had been right.

The stripper swings her breasts back and forth hard enough that they bounce off each other, creating a ricochet effect that sends the men into gales of giggles. Ramsey joins in the laughter but doesn’t feel it and stops before he gets started.

The first time Ramsey brought Anne Marie to the diner, Karen wrinkled her nose and stared as Anne Marie eased herself into the booth. When Ramsey went to the bathroom, Karen pulled him aside and said, “What do you call that, a muumuu?” He looked over at Anne Marie, who was wearing a loose dress that hung from her shoulders to the floor, hiding her shape. He shrugged and moved past Karen. “Is that really the best you can do?” she called after him. “What are you doing, charity work?” she asked the next time he saw her, and every day after she had some comment to make about Anne Marie, though Ramsey never bothered to answer. Karen only stopped when Anne Marie came in to show off the diamond ring he’d bought her.

The stripper tosses her head to Freddie Mercury’s anthem, her hair moving in one clump, as she struts toward Ramsey while his employees cheer her on. She leans over him, her breasts the only thing he can see. “Ready for one last good time?” she says, before pulling his face into her chest. Distantly, he hears his employees chant his name and whistle their encouragement.

When she finally lets him up for air, he holds out two fifties and says, “I’ll give you a hundred bucks if you leave.” She takes them with her teeth but doesn’t move.

Instead, she turns her ass to him, a mound of flesh that gives him an erection, and gyrates on his lap. She spins away from him and toward the bar stools where the men yell for her. Hands grab at her ass and breasts and stomach, but she keeps moving, twisting and spinning across the room. The guys sprinkle her with dollar bills, and when she does a split, everyone yells out his name.

"Ramsey, Ramsey," they chant. He hears Karen's lighter strike right behind his head, smells the cigarette smoke curling up into the already grease stained air, toward the fluorescent lights that line the ceiling. He turns to look at her. She stares at him, her lips turned upward in an ugly smile. She says something, but he can't hear her above the din. The men around her laugh, and Ramsey slinks down into his chair.

He likes big women, likes the gobs of flesh on Anne Marie's thighs and arms. Likes that he feels dwarfed by her. Ever since he first brought her into the diner, Ramsey's employees have been insolent. Karen shows up late most days. Only five or ten minutes, never enough to make her disrespect obvious. The rest of the staff does what he says, but only halfheartedly. No one understands the sex appeal of a big woman, that making love to Anne Marie is like sinking into a giant pillow, his whole body covered in her warm flesh. His employees would be fighting to go home with this stripper if they knew.

If he were marrying anyone but Anne Marie, they would have hired a tiny blonde with big tits. Instead, this woman struts around in her boots, spinning the tassels on her pasties in opposite directions while the men howl. She doesn't know that Ramsey's the only one in the room who appreciates her as she is.

The song winds down, her tassels stop, and she turns to him. “Someone looks a little lonely sitting all by himself,” she says. “He’s ready for his private dance.” Bending her knees, she leans forward and beckons him with a curled finger. Ramsey doesn’t move until she grabs his arm and pulls him forward, propelling him toward his office.

“You better enjoy this,” Karen whispers as they exit, “cause no one else is.” He opens his mouth to argue, but the stripper guides him inside the room and pushes him down into the desk chair, which wheels backward until it hits the edge of his desk. “Give him the works,” Karen says and closes the door behind her. There is a roar of voices from the guys out front, but Ramsey tunes them out when the woman puts one leg on either side of his lap, straddling him, her round stomach in his face, the scent of sweat and sex emanating from her.

“You don’t have to do this,” he says, but he’s running his hands up her arms, across her stomach.

She doesn’t answer, continues to press her body against his. He wonders what the guys outside think, what Anne Marie would think if she saw him.

“This isn’t necessary,” Ramsey says.

She feels like Anne Marie, but she’s harder, muscles hiding under all her fat.

“I respect you,” he says and shoves his face into her cleavage, inhaling the scent of sweat.

She steps back and laughs. “I don’t care,” she says.

He looks up at her face. “You don’t have to stay for the whole evening. I can pay you,” he says. “I own this place.”

“Your friends already paid me.”

“They’re not my friends,” he says. “They’re my employees.”

“Let’s just do this,” she says and turns her ass to him again.

He rubs his hands on her thighs but then stops. “Really,” he says. “Don’t.” He pushes her butt away from him.

She looks back at him and sighs. “You’re not gonna make this easy, are you?”

“I’ll make it easy,” he says. “Walk out the door, take a right, and slip out the back.”

She sits down in a chair across from him and crosses her legs. Digging inside her boot, she comes up with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She takes her time lighting a cigarette before looking back at him. “Why would I want to leave?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” he asks. She flicks ash onto the floor, but he doesn’t say anything.

She shrugs. “I should at least give you your money’s worth.”

“You did,” he says.

“If you think that’s all I do, you don’t know what you’re missing.” She lets more ashes fall to the floor, leaving a burn mark in a carpet already filled with them.

“I don’t need to know,” he says. Ramsey would get up if he could, but with her chair pulled close to him, legs draped across his thighs, he’s trapped. “Besides,” he says, “they’re laughing at you.” He nods toward the front of the restaurant where they’re replaying “Fat Bottomed Girls.” He hears them shouting but can’t make out the words.

“I thought you said you were the boss.” More ashes.

"I am."

"You must not be a very good one," she says and takes another drag. She stares at him, and he looks away.

"I'm a normal sized guy marrying a fat woman. That means something."

She drops her cigarette to the floor, unwinds her legs, and grinds the butt out with her heel. "Means something to who?" she asks.

"I love her," he says. "I think she's beautiful. I think you're beautiful. They don't."

She grabs her breasts, pushes them toward his face. "Those boys don't know what they're missing."

"They really don't," he says. He can't stop staring at her chest.

She leans toward him, pasties touching his nose. "You want this dance or not?"

"Yes," he says. He puts his hand on her breast but comes nowhere near covering all of it.

"You like that?" she asks, and she's back in stripper mode. "You can kiss them," she says, leaning forward. He licks around the pasties, and she runs her hand down his chest, rubs the heel of her hand against his crotch. He groans. She grabs his hair, pulls his head back, and kisses him. Even her lips are big. They envelop him, and Ramsey calls out, but his voice gets lost in the kiss. He groans again and can't stop the orgasm that overwhelms him. She's barely touched him, but he bucks against her, and she grinds herself into his crotch until he comes. She leans back, laughs.

"I'm sorry," he says.

“Don’t be sorry,” she says. “That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

“Not really,” he says.

“Yes, really.”

He smiles.

“You want to go back out there?” she asks.

“Not yet. I want to enjoy this for a minute.”

She takes out her pack of cigarettes and passes it to him. He takes one, lights it, and draws the smoke deep into his lungs. He hasn’t smoked in ten years, but it tastes as good as he remembers. He leans back, closes his eyes. “I could make this place nice again,” he says. She doesn’t respond, but when he opens his eyes, she’s looking at him. “Lay new linoleum, get the stools reupholstered, put a new sign out front. Get some high school girls wearing sweater sets and poodle skirts instead of Karen with her sour face. Make it a retro diner instead of a dive.”

“What’s stopping you?” she asks.

Ramsey takes a drag off his cigarette, blows a smoke ring into the air. “Absolutely nothing.”

CHAPTER VI

THE DOLLAR GENERAL*

Mom wants to yell; I can see it. Her face changes color, and she takes a deep breath. Her lips move, and I know she's counting to ten, so I say, "Sorry," real quiet. I look at the mess on the floor: GI Joe boxes stacked into dollhouse walls with empty Bratz doll boxes scattered everywhere. The dolls are piled in a heap on top of a baby car, and their evening dresses and disco shorts are strewn across the floor. "I can put it back," I say, but she's looking at my Easter outfit. A black streak down the front of my white shirt, maybe from climbing up the display to reach the clothes. The knees of my pink pants are brown. I hide my hands in my pockets. The dirt has even made its way under my nails.

We're going to Mrs. Taylor's for dessert. My mom cleans her house. She won't let me go, not like this. "We can get something else," I say. "They sell clothes here." Mom's eyes are fixed on my outfit.

Then, quiet, like a whisper but using her real voice, she says, "Do you think I'm made of money?"

We're only at the Dollar General to get cleaning supplies, and Mom said I could look at the Bratz dolls while she shopped. They're better than Barbie, because they have lots of makeup, crimped hair, and punk rock clothes. I pulled a box from the shelf and slid the cardboard tab out of the slot, peering down at the top of the doll's head. She had

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a Mohawk. I slid her out of the box and saw the yellow, pink, and purple stripes in her hair. The twisty-ties around her arms, legs, and waist pinned her to the cardboard insert, and I untied those too.

My Brat walked along the shelf, but she needed someone to play with, so I opened another box and pulled a dark-haired doll out. She was a Bratz doll too, but her box said Claudia. They walked together along the shelf, and my Brat said, "Go get me some clothes. I don't like this outfit," so Claudia climbed the shelves. I'm not sure why the store has Bratz dolls and Barbie clothes, but they do, so she pulled a green dress and leopard print pants from the display. The clothes are encased in plastic fronts glued to cardboard backs, so I helped Claudia open them. I looked around before I stood and threw the packaging between the shelves. "What's taking so long?" my Brat yelled, so Claudia grabbed the outfits from me and climbed down to the floor. I had to rip the Barbie pants at the ankle to get them on the Brat, but she liked them. Once she got dressed, she wanted a car, so Claudia crawled up the shelves until she found one in the baby section. While they sat on top of the car, I took more boxes from the shelves to build them a house. I was putting the finishing touches on it when Mom walked up.

"Well?" she says, but I know whatever I say will be wrong. I turn away, but my elbow hits the GI Joe boxes, and they tumble to the floor. I bend down and start picking them up.

I keep my head down and throw the Bratz boxes back on the shelf any which way. There's a loud crack. I jump when Mom's basket hits the floor. She doesn't say anything else, but she looks even paler than usual. It might be the fluorescent lights, but

her lips are trembling too. I see that glassy look in her eyes, the one she always has when she says she's too tired to get out of bed that day and I have to eat cereal for all my meals because I'm too young to use the stove. Without looking at me, she turns, walks down the aisle, and around the corner.

"Mom?" I call, but she doesn't answer. I grab the rest of the boxes and pile them on the bottom shelf. I need to catch her. I don't see the open boxes for the Bratz dolls, so I try to shove them between the display cases, but they're too big. I slip them behind the My Little Ponies and then cram the Barbie clothes between the displays. I run toward the front of the store.

Mom's gone.

I go to the aisle with the cleaning supplies. She might have forgotten something and gone to get it while I cleaned up the toys. I like to put things in neat rows like Mom does when she cleans houses.

It's my job to hold the funnel when she pours the generic cleaners into the brand name bottles. I asked her once if it's lying to do that, but she said that because the ladies don't know the difference, it's fine. I don't know whether to believe her, because she whips me even if I tell a little lie.

I run to the back of the store and check the bathrooms before I continue to the shoes and clothes. Maybe she's hiding in a display; maybe she's just trying to punish me. I bend down to peek under a rack of polyester pants, looking for her feet. When I stand up, one of the women who works there is looking right at me.

She squats, her hands on her knees, her face close up to mine. “Where’s your mom, hon?”

She’s our neighbor. Her nose is full of pockmarks, and her yellow shirt matches the sign outside. Her bangs are frizzy. She smiles at me with horsey teeth. She has a swing set in her yard. It’s old and rusty, but I sit on it sometimes on Mom’s bad days. “She went to the grocery store.” I point to the far wall and put on the smile I use when she comes to the window and looks at me on her swing. “I thought I could catch her before she left, but I guess I’ll just walk over there.”

The woman stands up to her full height and looks around. “Why were you looking in the racks?”

“I saw a bug,” I say. “A big one.” The woman looks at the floor, and I know she’s seen them too. “I should go,” I say, and she nods and turns away.

I go to the toy aisle in case Mom’s there, but it’s empty. I head toward the front of the store. The lady’s back is to me, and she’s talking to a younger lady who works there, but I hear her say, “…the kid a break. Her mom wanders around the neighborhood in her nightgown,” and know she’s talking about my mom. But she only did that once, and it was because she couldn’t find me.

My mouth waters. I realize I’m hungry, that we’re supposed to be at Mrs. Taylor’s right now, and I should be eating. I grab a Hershey bar off the display and walk to the door real fast. My neighbor is staring at me. Outside, I give her the finger and then run inside Shop ‘N Save. But Mom isn’t here. Or if she is, I won’t find her. There are too many people. I run back out the door.

Mom parked in the back of the lot, and I make my way there, weaving between the cars so no one sees me. I cram the candy bar in my mouth and chew. I jump over the cracks in the lot but stomp in the puddles left from last night's storm. My pants stick to my legs, and my arms are speckled with mud. When I get to her spot, there's just an empty shopping cart. The blue car with the white hood is gone. I run two rows over and then back in case I was thinking of the last time we came to the Dollar General, but it's all pickup trucks. I see a blue car farther down the row and run to it, but it's too new to be Mom's.

I move between the cars, kicking dandelions that poke up in the cracks of asphalt, too tired now to jump in the puddles. My legs hurt, and my head's starting to ache. My mouth is sticky from the chocolate, and I want a big cup of kool aid with lots of ice. It's hot. Sweat slides down my neck and into my t-shirt. I wipe it away, but my whole back is wet. I return to Mom's empty space and sit beside the cart. I can see everything from here, so I'll stand if Mom's car comes back.

I look up each time a car enters the lot. The sun makes its way across the sky, and the shade that covers me disappears. I wonder if she went to Mrs. Taylor's without me, if she'll bring me a piece of angel food cake, or maybe some turkey. Mom has to come back. When she does, I'll get in the car, and we'll act like nothing ever happened.

CHAPTER VII

GRIEF

When I walked through the front door, my old man was curled up on the couch, cradling a dog in a yellow nightgown, my mom's. Its nails were painted a bright pink, the same color Mom always wore. The dog shook its head, and there was makeup smeared across its face. The scent of Mom's perfume wafted across the room.

"Dad?" I said. I realized he was asleep, his arms curled around the dog.

He began to stir, stretching his arms and scratching the dog behind its ears before he saw me. He jumped from the couch and stood in front of the dog. "You shouldn't be here," he said. His voice shook. It was four in the afternoon, but he still wore his pajamas and bathrobe.

I stood in the middle of the room, nothing to say.

The dog jumped down from the couch and stretched, front legs forward, its ass up in the air. Then it circled the room, Mom's nightgown trailing behind it. Every few steps, it reached around and tried to bite the gown off. The retriever's fur was the same shade of blonde my mom's had been.

My dad had never liked dogs unless they lived outdoors and chased squirrels or rabbits during hunting season, and now this one was wandering around the room. I didn't know he'd gotten it; he hadn't mentioned it on the phone. When I was a boy, I'd begged him for a dog, but Dad always said I wouldn't take care of it or that we weren't pet people or that I could have one once I got a job and paid for it myself or any other

excuse he could think of to make sure no dog ever showed up on our front stoop. Once, a stray beagle came around the house for a while, and I fed it until it disappeared. Dad told me it had run off, but I found it in the woods a few days later, cold and dead with vomit all over its muzzle. I never asked for a dog again. That was thirty years ago, and even when I got my own place, I didn't consider adopting one. I never got the picture of that dead beagle out of my mind.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Dad shrugged.

"It's a rabbit dog, right?" I could hear the anger creeping into my voice.

"Nope."

"Then what the hell do you think you're doing?" I yelled.

"Nothing wrong with a man having a dog in his old age, is there?" He looked small, abashed.

"Yes," I said. "There is. For you, anyway."

My face was turning red. When I got really mad, the color crept up my cheeks to my forehead, all the way to my bald spot.

"It's okay, Bess," he cooed to the dog. "Tim just doesn't get it."

"You don't name a fucking dog after your fucking wife," I screamed. Mom's body wasn't even cold yet. We'd only buried her a week ago. My hands shook in anger. I gripped them into fists and then let go. I took a step forward and then back. I'd never hit my dad before, had only really wanted to a few times when I was a teenager and he

was being an ass, but it took everything in me to turn away from him and walk to the front door.

"I won't let you do this," I yelled, spittle flying from my mouth.

Dad didn't say a word. He stood in the middle of the living room, his hand buried in the scruff on the dog's neck. The dog lifted its back leg, scratching at the nightgown. I shook my head and slammed the door behind me.

I drove the five miles to my house but didn't slow down when I approached it. I knew what I'd find inside: complete silence, half-empty rooms, and mismatched furniture I'd gotten second-hand when I bought the house fifteen years ago. I sighed. Until Mom died, I'd spent most of my time at Mom and Dad's house. It was warm and inviting – you could tell people lived there. I ate dinner with them after work, and if I was tired, we'd watch Jeopardy together before I slept in my old bedroom.

I pulled up in front of the Elks and stared at the cinderblock building. I recognized the other trucks in the lot. They belonged guys who spent most of their days perched on bar stools sipping beer and playing the poker machines, a few others who sat in the back room and played pinochle for hours every day. I didn't feel like talking to any of them, but I didn't know where else to go – when I was out of sorts, I'd always gone to my parents' house. Mom usually had a pie or cookies on hand, and she'd pour me a cup of coffee to go with dessert. I didn't realize until she got really sick, but Dad had never been a part of my visits. He sat in the living room napping or watching TV while Mom and I talked over plates of food. Once she was bedridden, I'd watch TV with Dad for a few minutes before visiting Mom in her room, talking to her if she was awake

or holding her hand while she slept. Dad and I rarely talked, except to discuss how Mom was doing.

I stepped out of the truck and hitched up my pants. Inside, the air was smoky, the windows covered in dark curtains, the smell of deep fryer grease in the air. I took a seat at the end of the bar, away from the others who'd congregated at a table across the room.

"A bud," I told Carla, the bartender. She'd been working there as long as I could remember, her frizzy gray hair and smoke ravaged voice a fixture in the bar. She set her cigarette in the ashtray and pulled a beer from the tap.

"How you doing, Tim?" she asked and put the glass in front of me. "How about your dad?"

"We're doing okay," I said and smiled. "One day at a time."

Until that moment, I'd assumed Dad had been in the Elks since the funeral. I didn't ask Carla, as I didn't want her to confirm what I knew: that Dad had spent the past week cuddling his new pet.

She put her hand on mine. "We're thinking of you two."

I nodded, my throat tight. Dad had been a member of the Elks Club since he turned 18, and he brought me in on my 21st birthday. We'd known the people in here for years. Most of them had come to Mom's showing, and those who hadn't sent flowers. I chugged my beer in two gulps, but by the time I set my empty glass on the bar, Dan Federman was already sitting on the stool beside me.

"You got our flowers?" he asked. "We were still in Florida."

I nodded. He and his wife spent their winters at an RV park in St. Augustine.

"We were so sorry to hear about your mom," he said and squeezed my shoulder.

I was close to crying, tears perched on my lower lids, but I swallowed the sob and said, "Thanks, Dan. That means a lot, to my dad too."

"You take care of that old man of yours," he said and stood. "Tell him to come and see us. First beer's on me."

"I'll do my best." Before he made it back to his seat, I laid a five on the bar and was already out the door, shading my eyes in the sudden sunlight. I sat behind the wheel of my truck, waiting. My hands shook, and my eyes blurred with tears. I couldn't see the dashboard, never mind the road. Another truck pulled into the lot, and the driver honked. "Tim," he called. It was one of my dad's friends. I waved and shifted into reverse, wiping the tears from my eyes. "Hold up a minute," he said and got out of his truck. I hit the gas, pulling onto the road while he walked toward me.

I could barely see as I drove, but I'd taken the route enough times that I knew it from memory. By the time I made it back in my house, my eyes had cleared, but my breathing was ragged. I parked in the dirt clearing in front of my little house and gulped air. I stepped out of the truck, but my legs were rubbery. I put my head down on the hood and waited for the feeling to pass.

When was the last time I'd eaten? I wasn't sure. The day before, maybe. No wonder I felt like shit – beer on an empty stomach. I went inside and opened the fridge, but I hadn't been to the store in who knows how long. Mom used to send me home with leftovers. There was mustard and ketchup and some bologna, but I didn't know how old it was. The rest of the shelves were empty. The cupboards were just as bare, a box of

stale crackers that I hadn't closed completely, and a couple cans of green beans. I slammed the door, grabbed my keys, and walked back outside.

I meant to get in my truck and go to the store, but instead, I doubled over and started bawling. Right in the middle of my front yard. I sobbed like I hadn't the morning Dad called to tell me Mom had died during the night, the way I hadn't at the mass they'd said at the funeral, or when they'd lowered her casket into the ground. I howled like a little kid. Then, once all that sadness found its way out of me, I was left with a kind of anger I'd never felt before. I was mad at my dad and his stupid dog, at my mom for dying, at God for taking her.

"Goddammit," I screamed and kicked the truck's bumper. "Stupid fucking son of a bitch." I kicked the bumper again and again, cursing at the top of my lungs, tears and snot running down my face. I kicked until the fiberglass buckled and splintered, and I kept on kicking until I fell backward. I lay on the ground and howled. I thought of my father sitting at his house with only that stupid dog to hold onto while he cried, and it made me blubber even more. By the time my eyes were dry, the air had turned cold. None of my neighbors was outside, but you could bet a few of them were watching from behind their curtains. I got up and walked back to the house.

I stood in the shower until the hot water tank ran cold. Then, I pulled on a pair of boxers, lay on my bed, and slept like the dead. I didn't dream. I didn't pull the covers out from under me. I didn't even roll over. It was the best night's sleep I'd had since before Mom was diagnosed.

The next morning, I woke with the sunrise. I opened my eyes and knew what I had to do. I gathered a bunch of boxes and threw them in the back of the truck to take over to Dad's. The dog wasn't taking the nightgown. I'd bought that for Mom when she first got sick. The dog wasn't taking any of her other clothes either. I would pack them all up and take them with me. Damned if Dad would get away with his stunt.

I stomped my feet and called out as I walked in his house. I didn't want to surprise him again. Still, I stood in the entryway until he acknowledged me. "I have coffee." I held two Styrofoam cups from the Pantry Store. Dad made a pot of coffee every morning, and it tasted better than the cheap stuff you got from the store, but it felt odd to show up with nothing. Of course, the whole thing was odd – I didn't even know the house without Mom. It didn't smell the same anymore. It stunk of old man and of sickness and dying. Just a few weeks ago, it still smelled like baking bread and spices.

Dad was dressed, which was already better than yesterday. The dog approached me and growled low in its throat, but Dad clapped his hands and said, "It's okay, Bess. You know Tim."

Then, as though it really did know me, the dog approached and sniffed at my crotch before putting its front paws on my chest and keening to be petted. The nightgown trailed to the ground. The dog's nails were still painted, and it smelled like Mom's perfume. "Down," I said and removed its paws.

"We need to talk." I handed him the cup of coffee.

He took a sip, winced, and waved for me to follow him into the kitchen. There, he took my cup of coffee too and dumped them both down the sink. Then, he handed me a fresh cup from his pot. It already had extra milk in it. “Sugar?” I asked.

He nodded.

“You knew I’d come.”

“After yesterday,” he said and trailed off.

He sat at the table, and the dog planted itself between his legs. He reached his hand out automatically and buried it in the scruff of the dog’s neck.

“I was surprised,” I said but didn’t know how to continue.

He nodded but didn’t look at me. I sat in the chair across from him, the same one I’d sat in during every meal growing up.

He cleared his throat. “Bess,” he started again. “The dog—”

“It’s not good,” I said.

“The house is empty,” he said.

“I miss her too.”

He nodded, met my eyes. I stared back into his.

“Sometimes, it gets lonely,” I said.

“Exactly.” He clapped his hand on my shoulder and stood.

I watched as he refilled his own cup of coffee and then nodded at mine. I held out my nearly full cup, and he topped it off.

“That stuff from the Pantry Store is shit,” he said.

“I know.”

He sat across from me again. I could see him relaxing into normalcy, but I couldn't stop before I'd had my say. "But Bess?" I said. "You had to give her Mom's name too?"

"What's wrong with that?" he asked. "I thought your mom would like it."

"It's a dog," I said. "That's an insult to Mom's memory."

"The hell you say."

I shook my head and stood up. "I brought boxes," I said. "I'm taking Mom's clothes. I'm donating them to the Clothes Closet."

"They're mine."

"You're not giving them to your dog," I said.

"It's none of your business." He stood too and took a step toward me.

I put my coffee down and walked outside. I breathed in the cool morning air. I could let him keep an outfit or two, but not the nightgown. I grabbed a few boxes from the truck, but when I turned around, Dad was in my face. "You can't stop me," I said.

"I will if I have to," he said. "I'm still your dad."

"Then act like it," I said.

He hit me then, reached back and punched me. I staggered backward. Blood dripped on my fingers, and the pain exploded in my face. My nose was broken. I looked at him, and Dad said, "I didn't mean—" I didn't hear what he said next. Instead, I charged him and threw my shoulder into his chest, tackling him. We went sprawling across the yard, and I got on top of him and threw punches anywhere they'd land – his

mouth, his ear, his neck. At first, Dad let me. He covered his face but didn't try to fight back. The dog circled us but didn't approach. I could hear it barking and growling.

I glanced up, and the damn thing looked crazy, dragging Mom's nightgown through the grass. While I was distracted, Dad reached up and threw me off of him. He'd always been bigger than me, and I don't think I realized how strong he still was until I landed on the ground, my breath gone.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he yelled. He stood above me, his face already bloody and swollen from the blows I'd landed. There were tears in his eyes too, the first I'd ever seen. They slid down his cheeks, but he didn't wipe them away.

His dog ran to him and started growling at me, and Dad's hand automatically found the ruff of her neck. He squatted beside her and whispered in her ear while I caught my breath. He put his arms around her, and I had to admit it looked almost sweet. Sick and twisted, but sweet too. My nose still bled, and tears leaked from my eyes. Dad sat on the lawn and shook his head at me. "That's no way to treat your dad."

"You started it," I said and pinched the bridge of my nose.

He kneaded the dog's fur and looked across the yard. "What'd you do to your truck?"

"Nothing," I said.

"That's not nothing." He nodded toward my truck and its mangled bumper.

"It pissed me off," I said.

"Really?" There was a hint of a smile on his lips. "What'd it do, try to wear your mom's clothes?"

I didn’t want to laugh, but when I looked at him, his smile was wide. Then, I looked at his dog. It still had a smear of makeup across its face, and the nightgown was covered in mud. I couldn’t hold it in. First, it was just a little chuckle; then I couldn’t stop myself. I fell backward on the grass laughing. I looked over, and my dad was laughing too. For a few minutes there, anyone who drove by would think we were crazy, two grown men rolling on the ground while a golden retriever in a yellow nightgown watched.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TATTOO*

"How could I not have seen it?" Jackson leaned forward and stared at Martha's right ear, lifting her sand-colored hair to follow the straight line across the back of her head. It never got thicker than it was at the edge of her hairline, but when he reached the middle of her skull, it blossomed into an eyeball complete with veins and a dilated pupil. Even without a socket, the eye looked like it was bulging out of the middle of her head. The tattoo thinned into a line again, and he saw that the line ran from each side of the eyeball, ending at the crease where scalp and ear meet, traversing the back of her head.

"The new girl used clippers instead of scissors, so my hair's too short."

He gripped the steering wheel, even though they were still idling in the parking lot of their townhouse. "So you wore a hat," he said and dropped the pink ball cap in her lap. "Were you planning on sleeping in it too?"

"Our reservation's for six, right?" she asked.

"You have a tattoo on your head. Who cares about dinner?"

Jackson looked at her, but Martha had pulled down the sun visor and stared into the mirror, arranging the hat again.

"It's just ink, not a tattoo."

"What's the difference?"

"A tattoo means something."

"You hid it from me. Doesn't that make it mean something?"

"Ronald and Cam will worry," she said. She pulled a tube of lipstick from her purse and looked back to the mirror.

"Look at me," he said, but she applied the lipstick, rubbed her lips together, and used her nail to scrape the bits that had bled onto the skin around her mouth. He sighed. "Why did you get it?"

"It's rude to invite them out and then be late. We're celebrating."

It wasn't just Ronald and Cam's engagement party. It was going to be Jackson's and Martha's too, as long as she said yes.

The maître d' was in on it, as was their waiter. That's why he and Martha were going to the restaurant at six; Cam and Ronald were supposed to be there at five-thirty, and Jackson had been there last week to set up the details. After dinner, the waiter would bring out a cake for Cam and Ronald, but Martha's dessert plate would have a ring in the middle, one that Cam had picked out and already taken to the restaurant. The moment Martha looked at her plate would be Jackson's cue to get on his knee.

After the weddings, the four of them would enjoy dinners like this all the time, but their lives would be more permanent. Kids and family vacations. When their biggest problems would be skiing or the beach. Maybe when to upgrade their house, but then Jackson could stop worrying and know that his life was a forward trajectory, with small but solvable detours.

First, though, he needed to know about the tattoo. “Why on your head?” he asked.

“I haven’t talked to Cam since she said yes.”

“Why is it an eye?”

“Traffic’s getting worse.” She gestured to Maitland Drive, where lines of cars were forming. It was almost six, and people who worked in Morgantown were trying to get out of town. “I don’t want to make them wait.”

Their car crawled along with the others, but Jackson drove in silence. He watched the buildings that crowded closer to the road as each block became more rundown than the one before. This area used to be the arts district, before the arts died out and it became the poverty district. Now, instead of cafes and studios, pawnshops and neon lit bail bond companies lined the road.

When Martha was in her twenties, she had sold paintings two blocks from where the restaurant was now. One of her roommates used to bring home small squares of plywood that went in the scrap heap at the hardware store, and Martha used stencils and spray paint to create abstract pieces she would sell to Pittsburgh yuppies who came down on the weekends. Jackson guessed if this area were still the arts district, he and Martha would be the yuppies.

With his mid-length sideburns and manicured fingernails, he’d already looked like one when he moved here a few years ago, but Martha was a more recent convert. She’d replaced her old Volvo with a Subaru and got a shag haircut similar to other young professionals in town. He wondered how she’d explained those years of street art

when she applied for and got a job brokering international steel sales. Her old self would have hated her new self, would have hated Jackson.

He wasn't sure he'd like the person she used to be. Not that he knew much about who she was. She said she didn't like to think about it, and even Cam and Ronald kept their mouths shut. Jackson would have liked to ask Ronald sometime, but it was always the four of them. Which was odd, as Ronald and Jackson had known each other long before the girls had come into the picture. Now, though, it was Martha who brought them together, kept their relationship strong. She was the one who made plans. Jackson couldn't even remember the last time he'd done more than show up to a dinner or party she'd planned.

He tried to picture the Martha who would let someone take a tattoo gun to the back of her head, but he didn't know that person. "You had to shave your head," he said.

She didn't answer, so he glanced at her, but she was looking out the window. "They're already here," she said, "standing outside."

Jackson pulled into the lot of Provence Market, their favorite restaurant. Before he shifted into park, Martha was already out of the car and talking to Cam and Ronald.

There had once been a flea market in the lot where the restaurant sat, but it still had the charm of an older building, complete with ivy growing on the bars over the windows. The parking lot had never been repaved, the old vendor outlines still visible under the newer parking spaces.

Cam and Ronald both grinned as he stepped forward. He smiled back but couldn't work up the same enthusiasm for tonight that he'd had earlier. He looked at

Cam, whose past was still visible in the eight piercings in each ear and the scars in her nose and eyebrow from piercings grown over. Ronald had cleaned up more easily, and with his shining bald head and creased khakis, he fit in the world of Provence Market much better than he ever had in the art world. “Were you there when Martha got her tattoo?” he asked.

“You’re not even going to congratulate them?” Martha asked before Ronald or Cam could answer.

Jackson shook Ronald’s hand. “How’s it feel?” he asked.

“The same,” Ronald and Cam said, almost at the same moment. Sometimes Jackson was envious of how close they were, the connection they’d created over years, but he and Martha hadn’t yet had the time that they’d taken to know everything about each other. Cam and Ronald’s wedding seemed beside the point, as they had known and lived together for over a decade now.

Jackson and Ronald had grown up on the same street, lost their first teeth together and graduated from the same college. Jackson had met Cam ten years ago, after she and Ronald started dating, but he didn’t meet Martha until he moved to town, even though he’d spent a weekend at their apartment years before. It was probably Martha’s bed Jackson had slept in, the absent roommate with the scent of patchouli embedded in her belongings. He’d spent most of the weekend sneezing.

Jackson and Ronald followed the women inside, where the maître d’ led them to their table, a white cloth draped over his forearm, as though this were a better restaurant in a nicer part of town. The maître d’ smiled, his lips full and wet.

They'd barely sat down when Jackson said, "Ronald, you knew about Martha's tattoo, right?"

"Do we have to do this now?" Martha asked.

"I'd forgotten about those tattoos," Ronald said. "I shaved her head, and Cam shaved Donnie's in the kitchen of our old apartment. We should've done it in the bathroom. We found hair in our food for months."

"Donnie?" Jackson asked.

"They each got one," Cam said. "Then, they'd stand shoulder to shoulder, so it looked like they were watching us with those bulging eyes."

Ronald and Cam laughed, and Jackson wondered why he'd never heard this story before. He looked over at Martha who had buried her face in the menu. None of them had opened a menu here in over a year.

"Who's Donnie?" he asked again.

She looked up and said, "We're here to celebrate. Let's talk about something else." Her face was pale, and sweat beaded on her forehead.

"No way," Cam said. "Ronald proposed here, like we all knew he would, and there's not much more to say. Besides, this is great. I haven't thought about those tattoos in years. Can I see yours?"

Jackson took Martha's head in his hands and tilted it around toward Cam. Martha's face was inches from his, but she closed her eyes. "I can't do this," she said.

Cam leaned forward. "Look," Jackson said and traced the tattoo with his finger. They followed the line until it blossomed into an eyeball. Cam reached out to touch it.

Before they could follow it all the way to her other ear, Martha turned her head and said, “I think we all get the picture.” Martha’s face was red, but Jackson wasn’t sure if she was embarrassed or angry, maybe both. He couldn’t read her signals tonight, almost like they were on different frequencies.

The waiter stopped by to take their orders. He smiled at them, and Jackson noticed that most of the waiters had glanced at their table more than once, some giving him a thumbs up when Martha’s back was turned. He kept silent, didn’t know what he felt. Martha stared at her menu.

Jackson, Cam, and Ronald ordered steaks as usual. They waited for Martha to ask for hers, but she said, “I’ll have the roasted duckling.”

“Do you even like duck?” Jackson asked when their waiter was gone.

“Would I order it if I didn’t?” Martha asked, and Jackson felt himself color.

“Apparently there’s a lot I don’t know about you,” he said.

No one said anything.

“You didn’t know about the tattoo?” Cam asked.

“I just saw it today. I just heard about Donnie today. I still don’t know who he is,” he said.

“Was,” Ronald said.

Jackson looked over at Martha, but she stared down at the table. “Who was he, then?” he asked.

“Her boyfriend,” Cam said.

“Our friend,” Ronald added.

A gloom descended over their table.

"He died," Cam said.

"He was buying some pills for all of us," Ronald said. "Someone stabbed him. They never caught the guy who did it."

Jackson felt like they were sitting at one table, he at another.

"We cleaned up then," Cam said. "For Donnie."

Jackson remembered how hard Martha seemed to be trying when they met, the way she ran her fingers through her hair, as though she weren't quite sure what to do with it. How he fit into their group like they were waiting for him, but he knew now that it was because they'd always been a foursome. He was only a replacement.

"It's still an ugly tattoo," he said.

"It's none of your business," Martha said, slammed her hand on the table. Jackson's glass fell and hit his plate, cracking down the side. He watched the wine fill his plate and soak into the tablecloth, heard the conversations at the other tables fall silent. Cam jumped up and started blotting the mess, but it ran across the table and over the side. Jackson felt his lap getting wet and watched as his khakis turned red.

The maître d' scrambled to the table and began to apologize, laying towels over the mess and pressing one into Jackson's hand. Jackson looked up at him and said, "I don't think I want dessert after all," but it was too late. Their waiter rushed over and placed a plate with a silver cover in the middle of the table. "Ta-da!" he said and revealed the ring. He and the maître d' stood back. The other waiters stopped what they were doing and looked over at their table. Patrons began to clap.

Jackson looked at his friends. Martha looked at the ring. Cam and Ronald didn't seem to know what to do. Their eyes moved from Martha to the ring to Jackson. None of them moved. The guests stopped clapping and began talking too fast and too loud, while waiters hurried to refill water glasses.

Jackson stood and reached for the cover. He placed it on the ring, turned to Martha, said, "Let's start over."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

He paused. "I'm Jackson, and I want to know everything about you."

CHAPTER IX

MUDDIN'

Though they weren't married anymore, Chelle and Bill still got together for sex from time to time. But only when they had both been drinking at the Elks, usually on nights when the special was tequila shots. Cheap tequila with a little lime and salt was Chelle's favorite. After the first few shots, when Chelle said, "That's it for me. I don't want to crawl home," Bill would send a shot over to her table, then another. He would bring the third one himself.

They still liked each other when they were sober, but they only remembered how much they'd been in love when they were drunk. Then, it was as if they were still in high school and a bottle of Matador and a starry sky were all they needed to believe they were meant to be together. The wedding they'd had after a positive pregnancy test, the stillbirth months later, the intervening years of loving and hating each other until the hate outweighed the love – all that disappeared when Bill bought her drinks and put his hand on her leg under the table. Then, they remembered the nights Chelle had stopped believing she killed their baby and the months they'd spent trying to make a new one. Eventually, Chelle had come to believe she was defective. That was when the love had turned into hate. It had been a relief to end the marriage when they were thirty; there was no point in trying to make something work that obviously didn't. But every once in a while, when the sky was clear and the tequila went down smoothly, they were eighteen

again, and what mattered most was getting each other's clothes off as quickly as possible.

"Let's go muddin'," Chelle said one night after sex. They were at her house, formerly their house, in her bed, which had also been their marriage bed. Bill lay on his back, still breathing heavily, but that was more from years of smoking and working in the coal mines than from the sex, which had been quick and unimaginative. He sat up, lit two cigarettes, and passed one to her.

"I'm too drunk," Bill said.

"You're just the right amount of drunk." Chelle swung her leg around and sat on Bill's chest, straddling him. "It'll be like it used to be."

At the moment, she was almost drunk enough to believe it and that their fifteen minutes of sex had been like it was years before. Then they'd made love for hours, or at least touched and licked each other for hours, kept each other excited for whole nights.

"Your car?" Bill asked.

"Still at the Elks."

"Okay," he said. "But I'm driving."

"We always were good together," she said.

"We still are."

Chelle didn't bother with a bra – she threw a sweatshirt over jeans and called it enough. It was still early spring, and though the days were warm enough for a t-shirt, the nights still dipped into the 40s. Tonight, the moon was new and the sky was clear, millions of stars twinkling above them. With no cloud cover, it was also cold enough to

see your breath, and the weatherman had called for frost. As soon as Bill turned the key in the ignition, Chelle switched the heat to full blast.

Bill turned on the headlights and aimed them toward the trees. Chelle's doublewide trailer sat on an acre of land surrounded by woods. She didn't own anything outside of that one cleared acre, but the Millers up the road let her use the woods when she wanted, except during deer season. Then, she wore orange even in her yard.

"Hold on tight," Bill yelled as they sped into the trees.

The truck jumped forward, plunging into mud holes and climbing out the other side, mud flying into the air, onto the windshield and back onto the truck. Bill turned on the wipers, but they just spread the mess, making it even harder to see. But that was part of the fun, moving between trees, sinking into the mud and then spinning the tires until you popped out, flying across the forest floor until you got hung up again and had to work your way out, never knowing exactly what was in front of you.

Ahead, Chelle saw what looked like a small pond. "Don't," she said.

"Don't what?"

"It's too deep. We'll get stuck."

Bill laughed, a booming belly laugh that filled the cab of the truck. Then, he gunned it, and Chelle's stomach lifted and dropped as the truck plunged into the mud, curtains of water spraying up, enveloping the windows. They climbed out of the hole, tires spinning, motor whining, and continued farther into the woods.

They were approaching areas Chelle had never seen before, beyond the Millers' land, onto someone else's, miles from Chelle's house. They sped up, the forest flashing

by more quickly, saplings smacking the bumper and then disappearing. The truck bucked over mounds of earth, tree roots, and anything else that got in its way. Bill let out a yell as the truck slid across muddy grass and sideswiped a tree, knocking the side mirror off. Soon, Chelle was yelling along with him, both whooping at the darkness, feeling like the only ones alive in the empty night.

"I love you, baby," Bill yelled, and she said, "I love you, too." In that moment, they meant it.

There was another small pond ahead, but Chelle didn't yell out, and the truck dove into it easily enough, curtains of muddy water covering them again. But this time, when Bill gunned the engine to climb out the other side, the tires didn't catch hold. They spun in the mud, spewing water and chunks of earth behind them, while the truck sank into the muck. Bill downshifted and tried again, but the truck only settled more deeply into the earth.

"Wait," Chelle yelled over the whine of the motor, and Bill stopped and swore. Now almost completely underwater, the headlights dimmed. Chelle looked down and saw that the water had risen into the cab, covering her feet. She climbed onto the seat, but it was too late – her canvas sneakers were completely drenched. "Goddammit, Bill," she said, but he ignored her.

"I can't open the door," he said. He stuck his head out the window.

"No shit. I'll go out the back." Chelle opened the window in the back of the cab, and Bill pushed her through. It was cold enough that she could see her breath. The stars

were bright above her. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her chest, cursing herself for not bringing a jacket.

Already, muddy water had started to seep through the tailgate and into the bed. She peered over the side and saw that the tires were almost completely buried in mud.

She rushed back to the window. “Turn it off, Bill.”

“It’s cold,” he said. He held his hands over the heating vents. “Get back in so I can close the window.”

She stuck one leg and then another through the window and said, “You’ve gotta turn the truck off.”

“It’s too damn cold for that.”

“The water’s too high. The exhaust is covered. You’re gonna kill us.”

He turned and looked out the back, peering past the bed. “You sure?”

In answer, she turned the key, and the truck was silent.

“I was gonna do it,” Bill said.

“Not fast enough.”

“It wouldn’t kill us that quick.”

Chelle’s buzz had been wearing off for a while, and now she had a headache. “How do you know?” she asked.

“I just do. Besides, do you smell anything?”

“Carbon monoxide doesn’t smell.”

“Exhaust does.”

Chelle leaned back and closed her eyes. “Did you bring your phone? We’re gonna need a tow.”

“No,” Bill said. “We’ll have to walk out.”

“What about pushing it?”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“The usual way – you push, and I’ll steer. Maybe the wheels can catch onto something.”

“You saw how deep we are, didn’t you?” he asked.

“We can still try,” she said. It was cold and late, and she wanted to be back in her bed. Alone. She was too old for this.

“You push then. I’m not getting covered in mud.”

“No way,” she said.

“Exactly.” He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “We’ll have to walk.”

“Now?” Chelle asked.

“In the morning,” Bill said.

“What am I supposed to do ‘til then?”

“Keep warm.”

Chelle was shivering in her thin sweatshirt and wet shoes. “That’s easy for you to say. You’ve got extra insulation.” She looked at Bill and the weight he’d put on since their divorce – his gut was bigger, and he had a layer of fat around his face and neck.

"Well, look at you sitting there like you're something special," he said. He smirked at her, one eyebrow raised, arms crossed. "Not all of us think eating's bad. You lose any more weight and you're gonna look like an orange skeleton, all that tanning. Ever think of eating a burger?"

"I eat," she yelled. "I can't help it." She'd always been skinny, no matter what she ate. And not sexy skinny either. She hadn't gotten boobs or her period until she was sixteen, and her hips had never filled out. She was built like a kid and still had to buy pants in the girls' section at the store. It was embarrassing walking around with glitter and stars on the butt of your jeans, but those were the only ones that fit.

Bill looked her up and down. "It's like fucking a kid, no cushion for the pushin', and I'm not into that shit. If you didn't have hair down there, I couldn't touch you."

"Fuck you too," she said. "Mr. God-of-all-men. With that belly and the hair on your shoulders, I'm sure you have women everywhere trying to get on you."

"At least I don't go around pretending I'm perfect," he said. "You act like your shit don't stink, and now you're looking at me like it's all my fault we're out here. Remember, you're the one who wanted to go muddin'."

"I've never pretended I don't make mistakes," Chelle said. "I didn't say it was all your fault. I'll take my share of the blame."

"Like when you told me you only married me because you were knocked up?"

She lost her breath. "I didn't mean that," she said finally. "Not really."

He didn't answer or look in her direction.

"We both said a lot of things we didn't mean," she said.

"I'm going to try to get some sleep," he said. He leaned back in the seat, wrapped his arms around himself, and closed his eyes.

Chelle curled into a ball, but she couldn't get warm. She kicked her shoes off and stuck her bare feet in a crack in the seat. Then she pulled her arms inside her sweatshirt and wrapped them around her body to conserve heat. She pulled her sweatshirt over her mouth, breathing warm air onto her chest, but the moisture made her shiver. Her whole body shook, and she couldn't stop.

"We were good together for a little while, weren't we?" Bill asked.

"For a few years, I'd say." She looked at him, but his eyes were still closed.

"You ever think what would've happened if we hadn't lost the baby?"

"I try not to," she said. Bill looked at her then, but Chelle turned away. "I did that enough when we were married."

"Do you—"

"Let's just try to get some sleep, okay?" she asked.

"Okay," Bill said. He looked at her, and she met his gaze. "Okay."

"I'm just tired," she said and leaned her head against the side window.

Though the truck had a bench seat, she tried to keep herself as far from Bill as possible. Sometimes, it hurt being this close to him. When they were drunk, they were fine, good together even, but when they were sober, as she was now, a lot of hurt came through. A lot of love too, but Chelle couldn't always separate the two. Tonight they felt like the same thing.

Chelle looked out the window, but between the trees and lack of moonlight, she couldn't even guess the way back to civilization. The stars glowed enough to see a few feet in front of her but not enough to judge which direction to take. Out here, houses sat on fifty or a hundred acres and you could walk for hours without running into another person if you didn't know where you were going.

"You won't make it back on your own," Bill said, as though reading her mind.

"I might."

"No," he said. "You won't. As soon as it's light, we'll be on our way."

"Watch me," Chelle said and tried to push the door open, but the water and mud had sealed it shut.

"Baby," Bill said. "Baby, please."

He reached for her, but Chelle shrunk against the door. "I'm not your baby," she said. "Let's just go to sleep." She curled up again but couldn't stop shivering.

"You want to curl up together? We'll both stay warmer," Bill said.

She looked over, and Bill was watching her. She shook her head and turned away.

"It's gonna be a long night," he said.

It was cold enough that even the forest's normal nighttime noises were missing. Everything had dug a hole, built a nest, bundled up, and hunkered down for the night. Chelle and Bill were alone. She propped her back against the door, facing him.

"Have you dated anyone since we split up?" she asked.

"Dated?"

"Or slept with," she said.

"I slept with a couple women," he said.

"Oh."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

"I never thought about it 'til now," she said.

"They weren't dates. They were both just one night." He was quiet. Then, "How about you?"

"I dated one guy for a while," she said.

"And?" Bill asked.

"He liked to travel, and he talked about the trips we'd take. I realized he could give me the kind of life I always dreamed of, the one we could never afford."

"I couldn't help getting laid off those times," Bill said.

"I'm not blaming you," Chelle said. "The thing is, this man offered me everything I thought I wanted."

"He sounds perfect," Bill said. There was an edge to his voice.

Chelle nodded. "Almost," she said. "But his hands were too soft. Like he'd never done a day of real work in his life. I wanted to hand him a shovel or something."

"I ruined you," Bill said.

"Yeah," Chelle said. "I guess you did."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Bill pulled her feet out of the crack in the seat and rubbed them between his calloused hands. Chelle let him. She sat

on her side of the truck's cab, he on his, but her feet had crossed into his territory, and Bill kept them warm. Like that, with one touch over years of distance, they fell asleep.

CHAPTER X

JAWS OF LIFE*

"Where are we?" Iris asked.

"You have a doctor's appointment," Harold said again. "Remember?"

"Oh," she said.

As the hospital elevator rose, Harold leaned back and closed his eyes. He was tired, but when they slowed to a stop, he stood upright and opened his eyes. The reception desk faced the elevator, and Harold wondered if its placement was for patients who were sent up alone, their family members pushing a button and then taking a much-needed break.

"Mrs. Travers," the nurse said.

Iris didn't react. "That's us, sweetie," Harold said and guided her out of the elevator. Not that he expected a reaction. Iris's moments of lucidity had seeped away, leaving a confused old woman who didn't recognize herself or anyone around her.

"Can you keep an eye on her?" he asked the nurse.

She peered at him. "Are you feeling okay, Mr. Travers?"

"Fine," he said. "I'm fine. I forgot something in my truck. I'll be right back."

As soon as she nodded, he squeezed Iris's hand, but she didn't respond. He sighed. Iris looked like his wife, the woman who'd once picked him up from work and

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driven past their exit on the interstate, who'd continued driving all the way to the beach where they bought bathing suits and toothbrushes and spent a long weekend swimming and eating crab cakes. She looked like that woman, but she wasn't anymore.

In the elevator, he told himself to stop, to go back. On his way out to the truck, he convinced himself that he needed the paperback he'd left under the seat. Even sitting behind the wheel, he told himself to get out and return to his wife. Instead, Harold turned the key in the ignition, put the truck into drive, and inched toward the hospital's exit. On the road, he managed to tell himself that he was only taking a short drive. That Iris's appointment would last thirty minutes. As long as he was back by then, no one would ever know.

Harold felt older than his 70 years. His joints ached, and his eyes burned. It took him a few extra minutes to get up from a chair, and he hadn't been able to kneel in almost a decade. All he wanted was to fish on Saturdays and spend Sundays playing pinochle at the Elks. He wanted to watch TV in between naps and open his first beer at three. Instead, he put combination locks on the inside of their doors and reminded Iris who he was, who she was. And for a long time he didn't mind. He'd been more than willing to take care of Iris, to make sure her final years were painless. He'd even told her, right after her diagnosis, "I'm here until the very end." And he had meant it. He had taken care of everything the first decade she was sick, when she still had moments of lucidity, before she started calling, "Harold! Harold!" every time he left her alone in a room. When he'd run back to reassure her, Iris didn't recognize him. She didn't know the man whose hair had long turned gray, whose eyes were lost in a sea of wrinkles,

whose stomach lapped over the top of his pants. She expected the man Harold had been, the one she'd married thirty years before, when they'd both been young. Not the old man he'd become. Of course, it had been months since Iris yelled for him, when she still remembered that she had a husband. Now, he'd give anything for her to call out to him, even if it was only a memory of him.

He and Iris met at a support group for people who'd lost their spouses. Her first husband had had a stroke and died at the dinner table a few years before. "Forty's too young to die," she'd said, and Harold put his hand over hers. She smiled.

After the meeting, they went out for coffee. As soon as they sat down, Harold said, "I'm not a widower." He explained that he'd never been married, hadn't been on a date in years, that a friend had told him he needed to meet a widow. "And this is the only way I knew to find one. You can't walk up to women on the street asking if they're widows. And you're nice. My friend was right."

He'd ignored the cup of coffee, but after his speech, Iris added sugar and milk into both their cups and stirred. She pushed his toward him and said, "Well, that's one I haven't heard before." And then she laughed. A deep belly laugh that made people turn and stare. A laugh so contagious that Harold chuckled too. Until the whole situation became so absurd that they giggled until Harold's face hurt and Iris was gasping for breath.

They were married six months later.

Once, Harold had taken her to the Brickton Fair. He bought lemonade and a handful of tickets. He gave the tickets and a $50 bill to a ride operator. They rode the

Ferris wheel for hours, only getting off when the fair began to shut down for the night. On the ground, they felt like they were still moving in slow circles. Iris said it was the best date ever, even if they were already married. After that, they went to any fair that came to the area, even if only to ride the Ferris wheel and leave. Harold still loved Ferris wheels, though he hadn't been on one in years. They belonged to his life with Iris.

He pointed his truck toward the interstate, but he approached the onramp and drove past it. He merged with the traffic moving toward downtown Morgantown, the stop-and-go movement soothing to him at the moment, when he had to decide his next move. If he got on the interstate, he would keep going, past the exit for his house, through the mountains, until the hills petered out and he found himself on the shore. He wouldn't be able to stop. Behind the seat sat a bag with a change of clothes and a toothbrush. He kept it there for emergencies, like the night Iris had cut herself with a kitchen knife and had to get stitches. She'd been so agitated at the hospital that they'd sedated her and kept her overnight. Harold had slept by her bed and refilled his overnight bag the next day when they'd returned home. He'd needed it again when Iris got out of bed in the middle of a January night and walked down the street barefoot. He'd found her the next day, asleep under a child's swing in the park, her toes and cheek frostbitten. They'd spent longer in the hospital then, and Iris had lost her pinkie toe. That was when he put the combination locks on all the doors leading to the outside.

Ahead, downtown Morgantown loomed, a small cluster of buildings surrounded by the university and suburbs. Harold crested the hill and slammed on the brakes. A line of cars was stopped just past the summit. The little Mazda behind him managed to stop

without hitting him, its brakes squealing, but the truck behind it saw the stalled traffic too late. Frame jacked up, tires topping four feet, the truck climbed the rear of the little car and crushed the roof before coming to a complete stop. Harold watched in horror as the driver seemed to be crushed, the windshield buckling and bursting outward, the support beams bending, until it was difficult to believe the car had ever been more than a flattened mess.

Harold jumped out of his truck. He ran to the car and saw an arm pinned in the metal. The nails were bright red, a class ring on the fourth finger. “Are you okay in there?” he called.

“Hello?” he heard. It was faint.

“I hear you,” he said.

“I didn’t see her,” someone behind him said. “I tried to stop. I did.” The voice trailed away.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m stuck,” the woman said. “Get me out.” Her voice was frantic, rising in pitch.

Harold gripped her hand, and she squeezed back. He couldn’t see the rest of her, but the hand was strong. “Help is on the way,” he said. “Is there anyone in the car with you?”

“No,” she said. “I’m alone.” He heard a muffled sob.

He rubbed his thumb in circles across her palm, the way he did to Iris’s back, the one thing that could still calm her down.

Fluids dripped from the truck above, soaking his shirt. People stood near him, arguing over whether to move the truck. The driver's voice carried through the others and then faded. The sirens were still distant.

"I'm Harold," he said into the wreckage. "What's your name?"

"Help me," she called.

"I am," he said. "Focus on my voice. Tell me who you are."

"Angie."

"Angie," he said. The sun beat down on his head, made him squint. "What were your plans today?"

"Plans?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Where were you going before the accident?"

"I don't want to die," she said, her breath too fast.

"You won't," he said. "I promise."

A moment of silence, then, "Class," she said. "I have an exam."

"At the university?"

"Yes," she said. "Who are you?"

"Harold," he said again. "I told you." He looked around at the people who stood nearby, but none stepped forward to help.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I just dropped my wife off at the doctor."

"Is she okay?"

"No," he said. "She's not."

“I’m sorry,” she said, and he realized the absurdity of telling his problems to a girl who might be dying. He had no clue what was happening in her car.

“Are you bleeding?” he asked. “Can you feel your toes?”

“What’s wrong with her?” Angie asked.

“Can you move at all?”

“What’s wrong with your wife?”

“She has Alzheimer’s.” Sweat ran down the back of his head, to his neck, into the collar of his shirt.

“Oh,” she said. “I’m sorry,” and squeezed his hand.

The sirens surrounded them now, so he didn’t try to speak. Neither did she. The crowd around them had grown, and there were flares in the road. Ahead, his truck still stood with the driver’s side door open.

A fireman rushed toward him. “Sir,” he said, “I’m going to need you to step back.”

Harold unclasped his fingers, but Angie gripped him tighter. “Don’t leave me,” she called.

“Ma’am,” the firefighter said.

“Her name’s Angie.”

“Angie,” he said. “You need to let go of this man’s hand.”

“No,” she said.

The fireman stepped back and conferred with another man, both looking at Harold. He watched as police officers and firemen surrounded the vehicles and others told the onlookers to move away, until Harold was one of the few without a uniform.

"Harold?" Angie called.

"I'm right here," he said and squeezed her hand.

"I didn't study for my exam," she said.

"That's okay."

"I was going to copy off the girl in front of me. She writes big."

"I left my wife at the doctor's office," he said.

Angie didn't respond.

"I'm a horrible person," he said.

"No you're not," she said. "You've stayed here with me."

"I wasn't planning on picking my wife up from the doctor. I was going to leave her there."

"That's kind of bad," she said.

"Yes," he agreed. "It is."

"You won't leave me, will you?" Angie asked.

"I'll stay 'til the end," he said.

The firemen were moving now, ready to remove the truck from Angie's car. Police officers spoke into radios attached to their belts. Paramedics jumped from an ambulance that had just arrived and ran toward Harold. "You need to step back, sir," one said. "We have this."

"No," Angie called.

"I'm not going anywhere," Harold said to her. "I'm staying with you."

"Sir," the man said again. "I can't help her with you here. You need to move."

"I don't want to die alone," she yelled. "Don't let me die alone."

"You won't die," he said. "I promise."

She squeezed his hand one last time, and he let go. He stepped back, pulled down the tailgate on his truck, and sat. The firemen pulled machines from their truck, and a paramedic grasped the hand Harold had just released. Another group of men hooked chains to the truck.

He watched the rescue attempt, as first the truck was lifted from the crushed car, then attached to a tow truck. The firemen moved forward with the Jaws of Life. The roof of the car was so crushed it looked like Angie had been driving a convertible. A paramedic ducked beside the door and kept an eye on her vitals.

Harold blinked back tears, watched the flutter of Angie's fingers, tried to believe that she would be okay. The men used giant hydraulic scissors to snip the top of the car away, until Angie's head poked up. She was younger than Harold had thought, no more than nineteen. She wore streaks of blonde and pink in her dyed-black hair, and trails of mascara clung to her cheeks. Even from this far away, he could see that her tears had washed away a thick layer of makeup.

"Angie," he called and waved. She looked at him, and her eyes filled with tears.

A paramedic slipped an oxygen mask over her face and tended to her arm, which already had a giant black and purple bruise across the area where the car's roof had

pinned her. The firemen moved on to cutting the dashboard from around her lap. The sun beat down on Harold's bald head. He needed water and a hat, but he didn't move. It had been at least an hour since he'd left the doctor's office.

As the final pieces of the car were removed from Angie's legs, he watched the paramedics move in, sliding her onto a backboard, tending to legs that looked misshapen from the car's weight. She kept her eyes on his as they rushed her to the ambulance.

"Wait," Angie yelled and pulled the oxygen mask from her face. The paramedics tried to replace it, but she shook them off. With her good arm, she pointed toward Harold. "He's coming with me."

Harold stood and took a step toward her. He would ride with her, hold her hand the whole way.

"Are you family?" the paramedic asked him.

Harold opened his mouth to speak, but Angie said, "He's my granddad."

He grabbed her hand and nodded while he held back tears. He was old enough to be her grandfather. He just hadn't thought of himself that way.

Angie let the paramedic replace the oxygen mask, and Harold climbed into the ambulance. He sat on one side of Angie, while the paramedic sat on the other. Angie closed her eyes but didn't let go of Harold's hand. He used his other hand to smooth the hair back from her forehead. He realized they were heading back the hospital where he'd left Iris. His pulse quickened.

“It’s crazy,” the paramedic said once they were moving. “Her car looks like it went through a compactor, but she’ll probably get out of the hospital today, tomorrow at the latest.”

Angie looked almost fine. The backboard was a precaution, and her arm was probably broken, but somehow the car had created a cocoon around her, rather than crushing her. She’d be bruised and sore, but alive. Whole.

When they reached the emergency room, the ambulance’s back doors opened. The paramedics pulled Angie’s gurney out, and Harold followed. He walked beside her as they pushed her into the ER, but when they approached the double doors into the treatment area, a nurse stepped forward. She put her hand against Harold’s chest. “You’ll need to wait over there,” she said and pointed to a row of chairs.

“I can’t leave her,” Harold said. “I promised.”

“Yes, you can,” Angie said and let go of him. He reached for her hand, but it was already out of his reach.

The doors swung shut, and Angie disappeared from his sight. Harold started toward the chairs and then stopped. He walked toward the elevator. Once the car arrived, he stepped inside, his ascent swift.

CHAPTER XI

FIRSTS

Monica showed up at my house with gym bags full of clothes, makeup, curling irons, hairspray, shoes, and anything else that might make us beautiful enough to go to the Brickton Fair. She looked through my closet and shook her head. “You can wear my clothes, Rachel,” Monica said in a voice that was oddly throaty, almost sultry, for a fifteen-year-old. “I’ll do your makeup too,” she added.

She emptied mountains of clothes onto my bed and dressed me in one outfit after another until she was satisfied. Monica’s skinny jeans fit me like a second skin – she had no curves, while my hips and boobs had appeared out of nowhere over the summer. “Sexy,” she proclaimed. “They sure don’t look like that on me.” She checked out her non-existent butt in the mirror. She found a red halter top on the bottom of her pile of clothes and finished off the look with four-inch platforms.

“We’re going to the parade, right?” I asked. She nodded. I said I couldn’t walk so far in those shoes.

It was a mile from my house to the parade, and I usually skipped it. My parents said it wasn’t worth the walk to hear fire engines and the high school band making so much noise. “I’ll start a fire if you want to hear sirens,” Dad always said. But Monica said the parade was our chance to scope everyone out. We would be going into our sophomore year of high school, and this was our chance to see how much everyone had

changed over the summer and get first dibs on the guys who'd grown into their man-sized feet.

"You don't wear platforms when you walk," Monica said and rolled her eyes. "You wear flip flops and change when we get there."

"Oh," I said. I was still learning the rules. The year before, I hadn't been on Monica's radar, but now that I'd filled out and persuaded my mom to let me straighten my hair, she'd decided to befriend me. Once she learned that I lived on the hill above the fairgrounds and that I could have a week-long sleepover, I'd supplanted Jasmine as her best friend. I wasn't always sure that I liked Monica, but her life was more exciting than mine. I usually went to school and played basketball in the afternoon. Monica talked to boys and tried on new shades of lipstick. I wanted to try on her life for a while and see what I was missing.

My mom stared as we walked down the stairs, our hair sleek, eyes done in layers of mascara and eye shadow, lips lined and filled in, clothes that hugged my curves and Monica's mile-long legs. Mom's eyes were wide and worried. She opened her mouth to say something, but I shook my head. She smiled instead, though I knew it was fake. "Well, you girls sure look grown up."

"Thanks, Mrs. Peters. I hope you don't mind. I made Rachel up." Monica beamed. She knew the right thing to say. Parents liked her. The worry in my mom's eyes faded.

"You look so sophisticated," Mom said to me. "I wasn't ready for that."

"Mom," I said and blushed.

"We'll be home as soon as the fair closes," Monica said and grabbed my hand.

"I'd rather—" Mom started, but Monica and I were already running out the front door. I'd never been allowed to stay at the fair past ten, but I was fifteen. I was old enough.

We stood by the dentist's office for the parade, but before it started we replaced our flip flops with platform shoes for me and heels for Monica. She waved at boys I'd only looked at before, never daring to speak. "Look at Jimmy D. walking with his mom," she said and laughed. "Guess he didn't change over the summer." When Jimmy looked over at us, he saw Monica laughing and continued on his way. I stood a little behind Monica when friends of my parents walked by, hoping they wouldn't see me, and if they did, that they wouldn't recognize me under all the makeup. I didn't want her to make fun of me too.

"Look," she said and cocked her head toward Ben March who was walking down the opposite side of the street with a guy I didn't know. She waved at the boys, and they walked toward us.

Monica grabbed my arm. "I get Ben. You take the other one."

I nodded.

"He's cute," Monica said. "He might be new. Or Ben's cousin. It doesn't really matter. This is your chance."

"My chance?"

"It's not enough to look the part," Monica said. "You need a boyfriend."

A boyfriend. I'd never had one before, never even been kissed. It was kind of embarrassing, really. Even Melanie Jensen, who had acne and didn't shave under her arms, had kissed Andy Killingsworth. He had bad breath and body odor, but still. I was woefully behind everyone in my grade when it came to that stuff. And the guy crossing the street toward us was cute.

"This is Max," Ben said. "He's new."

"You remember Rachel?" Monica said. Ben looked at me, but I obviously hadn't registered freshman year. "She's kind of new too," Monica added and laughed.

She didn't look the least bit nervous talking to Ben, though she'd already filled me in that they were boyfriend/girlfriend in ninth grade but hadn't seen each other over the summer, so she wasn't sure if they still were. I glanced at Max and looked away again. He was staring at me. I blushed.

"Max," Monica said and nudged me. "Where are you from?"

"Ohio," he said.

"Why'd you move to West Virginia?" I asked.

He smiled. Boys didn't usually smile at me. I grinned and lifted my chin. Monica wrapped her arm around Ben's and started walking down the sidewalk, ignoring the parade completely, not that we'd paid much attention to anything but the fair queen contestants anyway. When the cheerleading squad passed by, Monica laughed and aped their movements, waving her arms in the air. Ben cheered her on. I decided not to tell Monica that I'd tried out for and been cut from the squad my freshman year. Max and I

watched Monica's show but didn't join in. I didn't tell him that I thought the cheerleaders were graceful, that I'd always wanted to be so popular.

At first, Max and I didn't touch at all, kept at least a foot between us, but after he laughed at something I said, I inched closer, and my arm brushed his. He talked all the way to the fairgrounds. I nodded and said, "Really?" or, "Hmmm," when I thought I should.

The sound of songs that had been popular the year before blared from giant speakers, and strobe lights from some of the bigger rides flickered across the faces of people who passed by. We could see them, but they couldn't see us. We sat outside the fence of the public pool, on the edge of the fairgrounds, hidden in the shadows. The concrete was damp, and there was nowhere to lean back, but Monica had claimed this spot for the week. We were its queens. People from school dropped in and out all evening, but Monica and Ben and Max and I were staples. Every time a boy looked at me, Max scooted closer. Once, he put his arm around me. I liked it.

Max pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to me. I looked at Monica who nodded, so I accepted it. I'd never smoked before. Max held the flame to my cigarette first, and I sucked on it when the fire met its tip. The smoke filled my mouth, but as it hit my throat and then my lungs, a cough exploded from me, and the cigarette flew through the air and landed on the ground. I leaned forward as tears of pain sprung to my eyes, and ropes of spittle hung from my lips as I tried to stop the hacking and find

my breath again. When I finally looked up, everyone was staring at me, Max laughing softly. So much for being cool.

"Like this," he said and lit his own cigarette, sucking smoke deep into his lungs and exhaling through his nose.

Monica and Ben followed suit before standing up and walking away from the fair, into the roped off playground that was normally open but was closed for the week. I followed the orange lights of their cigarettes until they ducked into one of the pavilions.

"Where are they going?" I asked.

"To be alone," Max said. "Do you want to be alone with me?"

No one was nearby. "We're already alone."

"Out there," he said and nodded toward the pavilions.

"No," I said. "Not right now."

"Later?" Max asked and kissed my neck.

"Maybe," I said and leaned away from him.

I looked toward the pavilions and then back at Max who was watching me. "You're not a sophomore," I said.

"I am," he said.

I ran my hand across his cheek, felt the stubble that I'd noticed earlier. "Boys our age don't need to shave."

"I'm not a first time sophomore," he said. "School's not really my thing."

I didn't tell him that I loved school. I didn't know what else to say, so I looked at the lights of the rides behind us. We'd paid to get into the fair and then come straight

here, not even bothering to buy a funnel cake or get in line for the Tilt-a-Whirl. Now, the music was beginning to slow, some of the rides closing up for the night. It had to be close to eleven. My mom would be waiting.

"Let me show you," Max said, and I thought maybe we'd go into the lights instead of sitting on the damp ground beside the pool, but he shoved his cigarette into my hand. "Don't breathe it in," he said. "Just fill your mouth up with smoke and blow it out."

It took four tries before I could do it without hacking. It tasted bad, but I liked it. The smoke made me high; I felt like I could do anything. "Give me another," I said. Max lit it for me and handed it to me. The butt was wet with his spit.

We were halfway through our second cigarettes when Monica came back, Ben's arm wrapped around her waist, the tips of his fingers inside the tops of her shorts. Her hair was messy, and I wondered how far she'd gone.

"We should go soon," she said to me. "You two say your goodbyes."

I nodded and started to stand up.

"Don't hurry," Ben said. "You've got a few minutes."

I looked over at Max, and he leaned in, his mouth already halfway open. I didn't quite know what to expect, but his tongue was in my mouth as soon as his lips met mine, and I tried to move my lips in response to his. His whiskers were rough against my face. After what felt like hours, he leaned back and smiled softly. "I'll see you tomorrow?" he asked.

I nodded. It didn't really matter whether he liked school. I liked him.

***

Monica and I sat across my bed from one another, comparing notes on the night before. "You can't spend the whole week by the pool," she said.

I was glad. After two nights of nothing but cigarettes and sloppy kisses, I was getting bored. I wanted to get cotton candy and eat it on the Ferris wheel while Max held my hand. I wanted him to hit a balloon with darts until he won me a stuffed animal.

"You're being a cock tease," Monica said.

"A cock tease?"

"Max told Ben you gave him blue balls."

I was embarrassed to ask her what that meant.

"Don't just sit there," Monica said. "You've gotta do something about it."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Fuck him," she said.

"No way," I laughed. She couldn't mean it. I wasn't trying to wait until I was married or anything, but I'd only known Max a few days.

"Rachel," Monica said, "this is serious. Max already asked if I have other friends."

My stomach dropped. I couldn't picture tagging along with Monica and Ben. They didn't need a third wheel, and I liked Monica's life better than my old one. Boys looked at me. Older girls, seniors, nodded like they knew me. "What do I do?" I asked.

"Take him to the park," she said. "Back to the pavilion. At least give him a blowjob."

"Gross," I said. "What do I do?"

Monica burst out laughing.

"Where do you learn this stuff?" I asked.

"What stuff?"

"What to do with guys. How to dress. How to put on makeup." I threw up my hands. At school, I always knew the answers, but here I was failing. No wonder I'd never had a boyfriend. I didn't even know what to do with one.

"Sucking dick is just like sucking a finger," Monica said. "A little different, but the same idea. I'll show you. I'll show you all of it."

I let Max unbutton the front of my shirt and felt his hands fumble with my bra clasp before he pushed the cups above my breasts. "Wow," he said, and I smiled, but he never looked at my face. Instead, he grabbed my boobs in his hands and stuck his face in between them.

I wondered if he could hear my heart beating. I could. I was trying to remember what Monica had told me, trying to do it all right. Max's kissing and grabbing excited me, but sometimes my mind wandered as I thought about what she'd told me to do next.

"Oh baby," I whispered and moaned a little.

Max seemed to like it. He pushed me onto the concrete floor. My head thumped against the ground, but he didn't notice. He was rubbing up against me, and I arched my back, pressing closer to him. Part of me wanted to shove him off me, tell him we were moving too fast. He pulled his t-shirt over his head, and I knew I shouldn't let him go

much further. Then, Monica's words "cock tease" echoed in my head, and I realized I couldn't stop. If he was upset about having blue balls before, he wouldn't forgive me now.

I remembered Monica telling me to take some initiative, so I unbuttoned his jeans. The head of his penis poked up through his underwear, and I grabbed it with both hands. Max groaned. "Gentle," he said. "Gentle."

That's when he started pulling my pants down, and I started to pull them back up but instead whispered, "There's a condom in the pocket of my jeans."

"Don't worry," Max said. "You can't get pregnant your first time."

He was wrong, and I started to say something but stopped. Monica said to go along with him, to make him feel good, like he was in charge. I kicked my jeans off my feet and put my hands around his head, pulling him toward me.

Before I knew what he was doing, I felt his knee spread my thighs, and then he shoved his dick inside me. Monica had warned me that it might hurt the first time, but I was surprised at how much it burned. I felt like he was ripping me from the inside. I wrapped my knees around him, let out moans when it hurt too much, and didn't let him see the tears in my eyes. He started to push harder and faster and made grunting noises. I tried to move my hips in pace with his but couldn't, so I stopped and let him jerk my body around as he wanted. Then, he shrieked a little, and I knew this was the moment Monica had described. It would be over soon if I just waited.

It was. He froze and fell in a heap on top of me before looking at my face and grinning.

"Oh, baby," he said and kissed me. He rolled off me and stood, still half-dressed, his pants and underwear shoved down below his ass, his shoes still on. "I'll be right back," he said and ducked outside the pavilion.

I heard his piss hit the ground and grabbed my purse where I found a maxipad and stuck it to my panties. Monica had been right to give it to me – I could already feel juices on my inner thighs. By the time I heard Max's zipper, I was back in my pants and had my bra over my breasts. All I had to do was button my shirt.

Max grabbed me and hugged me against his still bare chest. "Rachel," he said. "I love you."

"I love you too," I said.

Max put his shirt on, took a cigarette for himself, and handed one to me. I held it between my teeth while he lit it, then buttoned my shirt. We walked out of the pavilion trailing cigarette smoke behind us. If Monica had been looking, she would have spotted us by the glowing orange lights.

CHAPTER XII

CONTROLLED FALL[6]

Nathan shoved me, and I said, “Let go,” but Marney moved too slowly, and both of us ended up in a heap on the living room floor. “Faster,” I told her, “or we’ll both get hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” she said and stood.

“Don’t be sorry,” I said. “Do it right.”

Then Nathan shoved me from behind, and Marney stepped away. I loosened my limbs, let myself fall, and landed unhurt.

“Good,” I said. “Again.”

“Don’t forget to protect your neck,” Nathan said. “You’re safe here, but what if you’re in public?”

We’d thrown yoga mats around my living room and pushed the furniture to the walls, creating a place for me to practice, but Nathan was right. The last time I’d fallen, I was at the grocery store and had crashed into a shelf on my way down. I’d hit the floor and held my hands over my head as cans of tomatoes rained down on me. I’d left with a swollen knee and can-sized bruises forming all over my body. I’d hired Marney a week later. She served as my companion, someone to help me traverse this new world until I could do it alone.

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[6] Reprinted with permission from “Controlled Fall” by Laura Leigh Morris, 2015. *Conclave: A Journal of Character*, Issue 8, 40-48, Copyright 2014 by Laura Leigh Morris.

"Like this," Nathan said and showed something to Marney. I closed my eyes and waited, not that it made much difference now whether my eyes were opened or closed. My world had reduced itself to faint outlines, blurred movement, and large swathes of color, the loss both faster and more startling than my doctors had expected. First the problem was confined to books, then moved on to television, until people and objects began to lose their sharp lines, and I had to differentiate by color alone. Now, even colors had begun to fade.

Marney grabbed my arm, and I pulled away. "Not like that," I said. "I'm not a cripple. I'm blind."

I held out my hand, and she put it in the crook of her elbow, like I'd shown her. I didn't hear Nathan's footsteps and wasn't ready when he grabbed my ankle. I toppled to the floor without letting go of Marney, forcing her to come with me.

"That's not fair," I said, rubbing my ankle.

"What isn't?" Nathan asked.

"I didn't hear you that time."

"You wouldn't hear anything in a real fall," Marney said.

"Don't you think I know that?" I said. "I'm sixty years old. It only takes one wrong landing to crack a hip, and I don't want it to happen when someone's throwing me on the floor."

"I'm not throwing you," Nathan said. "I'm helping you."

Marney was sniffling. “What are you crying about?” I asked and wondered again why I hadn’t hired someone with experience, someone who was more than a year out of high school.

“I’m not crying,” Marney said, but her voice gave her away.

At least she wasn’t sobbing, which she’d done the day I hired her, when I asked her to walk more softly through my house. Marney was a heavy girl, and her footsteps made the floor vibrate. I had to remind myself that she was young, that I had done her mom a favor by hiring her. Marney wasn’t the brightest girl, but she could listen to directions, which was all I needed.

“Nathan,” I said, “can we be finished for the day?”

“You need to get this, Agnes,” he said. I could hear the fatigue in his voice. This was the third week we’d practiced falling, and he said we needed to move on to controlling other aspects of my life. I didn’t think he had anything to show me beyond falling, going limp, letting myself hit the floor with a dull thud. My body was always covered in bruises now, but there were no worse injuries. I’d never realized how many things stuck out of walls and off furniture.

Beyond that, most of what Nathan said was about how to arrange food on the stove and how to put it on the plate so that it was the same every time. How to rearrange my cabinets and the glory of extra large buttons. Like I was a child.

“We’ll practice,” I said. “Won’t we, Marney?”

“Yes,” she said. “By next week, we’ll have it down.”

Whatever we said must have worked, because Nathan left. I ran my hand along the wall until I reached my bedroom. There, I turned on the radio and ignored Marney's grunts as she pushed the living room furniture back into place.

"I checked out some books from the library," Marney said before setting my plate on the table. "They said it's harder to go blind than to be born that way. Your body will automatically adjust to having only four senses when you're a baby. But you'll have to train yourself."

"You sound like Nathan," I said, but she ignored me.

"I thought we could practice a technique with supper. I won't tell you what we're eating, just set it in front of you. Then, you guess." Marney sounded pleased with herself, as though she were the first person to try this.

"No," I said.

"What?"

"I've done this before. It doesn't help. Believe me. I can't tell chicken from turkey. I don't know apple from grape juice. And I won't do it again."

Marney squatted. "Please," she said, "just once. And I won't bother you again."

The begging in her voice was clear, that she had finally found something she could do right besides clean the house. The day before, she'd burned toast, and the coffee had grounds in it. Before that, she brought Daley Higgins home from the grocery store with her. I locked myself in the bathroom and wouldn't come out until Marney sent her away.

“I told you, no visitors,” I’d said. It was the only rule I’d given her. When I first noticed my sight was deteriorating, I pretended I wasn’t paying attention when I missed a detail. I went to a doctor who told me that laser surgery was the only thing that would stop the vessels in my eyes from leaking. It was simple, he said. Blast the blood vessels that were already bad and a few more minor surgeries when and if others acted up. During the surgery, that same doctor had been too liberal with the laser. I woke up with half the eyesight I’d had beforehand, and the rest of the blood vessels in my eyes seemed to start leaking the next day.

When Daley brought me dinner the weekend after the surgery and I could barely see her, she’d gone quiet and left as soon as she’d eaten the last bite from her plate. Later, when I went to work to get the last of my belongings so that I could start my abrupt retirement, people either didn’t talk to me or they spoke to me like I was dying. After the incident with the cans at the grocery store, I’d had enough. I stopped leaving my house, and only Nathan and Marney were allowed to enter.

After Marney sent Daley away, I said I’d send her back to her mom if she ever tried something like that again. Marney had apologized, and I’d forgiven her as soon as I heard the tears creep into her voice.

“Okay,” I said and reached for the plate, “but only this once. Don’t ask me again.”

Marney jumped to her feet. “No cheating,” she said. “I know you can see pretty well with these bright bulbs.” I didn’t tell her that even with them, the world had almost completely disappeared.

I stabbed something with my fork and brought it to my lips. It was bland, both slimy and gritty. I grabbed the napkin from my lap and spat it out. “The taste is why I don’t eat those damn things.”

“But you know what it is?”

“Yes, and I think it’s unfair to test me like this. How many people eat avocados for dinner? In the middle of winter. They taste even worse off season.”

“I wanted to give you something easy the first time.”

“Okay, you made your point. I want to eat something real now.”

Marney grabbed a plate off the counter. “There,” she said, pushing it in front of me. “You figure it out.”

Her footsteps retreated across the hall, behind her bedroom door, then stopped. The bedsprings squeaked, and again, before settling. I held my head cocked, hoped I didn’t look like those blind musicians sitting behind their pianos, their necks bent at odd angles, broad grins across their faces. The way their heads swung back and forth as the music moved them. This was the first time Marney had talked back to me. I wasn’t sure what I thought of it.

I shoved my fork into the middle of the plate where it hit porcelain. For a second I thought it was empty but then realized that Marney had set the food around the edges. I’d talked about this with Nathan, how some people liked it arranged on the sides, others with something in the middle. I didn’t care, as long as I could eat.

I speared a piece of meat and put it into my mouth. It was stringy but moist, maybe roast? Or pork loin? Could even be squirrel, which I’d eaten as a girl. I was no

good at this game. What if Marney had given me possum, knowing I would have no clue? I put my fork down and pushed back from the table.

"Not hungry?" Marney asked.

"I can't eat it if I don't know what it is," I said.

"What do you think it is?"

I didn't answer. Marney walked around the table, her footsteps reverberating through the floor and up into my chair. She sat and took a bite of something from her own plate. "I know what it is."

"Don't you think I know that? Your job isn't to trick me. It's to help me, so help, dammit."

"Help yourself," she said.

I sighed. "First I thought roast, then maybe a pork loin. It's kind of like squirrel, but I figure it could just as easily be possum."

"Possum? You think I would serve you possum?"

"Who knows?" I threw my hands up. "I don't know you. I babysat your mom thirty years ago, and now you live in my house. My head's full of thoughts about how I'm going to live when you're gone, and I can't even see your red hair anymore unless we stand in the sunlight." I felt a few stray tears on my face. I wasn't crying, not really, but my eyes had sprung leaks. They were betraying me every time I turned around.

"Pot roast," Marney said. "I put it in the crock pot with carrots and potatoes, which are mixed together at the bottom of your plate. But now it's cold."

She picked up my plate and put it in the microwave. We ate dinner in silence.

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After weeks of working through the books with Marney, my eyesight, almost completely gone, had become an afterthought. I rarely turned on the 150-watt bulbs that Marney had installed throughout the house. I didn't know the last time I'd flicked the switch in my bedroom. My fingers were more nimble, my organization better. I remembered where things were, learned to listen for the force of Marney's footsteps instead of trying to make out the expression of her face to understand her mood. Learned to taste food and decipher what it was by taste and texture. Never expected everything to be as it should be but instead to anticipate that nothing would be as it should. Learned to control my own fall.

I stood at the counter chopping onions and tried to think of a way to show Marney that she was succeeding, that her books and the way she wheedled me with her tears helped. Without her, I wouldn't be cutting vegetables, would have still been afraid of knives. I owed her.

After breakfast, we'd venture into town. I would help with the grocery shopping that Marney usually did on her own, learning to move among other people and maneuver in unfamiliar places. Since Marney arrived, I hadn't left the house, had let her take care of everything. But Marney wouldn't be there forever. I tried to push my fear away as I sliced vegetables for our omelets.

I heard Marney's heavy footsteps move from the bathroom toward her bedroom, smelled the steamy scent of a woman freshly showered. I cracked the eggs against the

rim of a mixing bowl and heard them splat in the bottom. I poured the milk slowly, as I listened to Marney moving around her room, getting ready for our day on the town.

In the car, I sat with my hands in my lap and said nothing.

"Are you okay?" Marney asked.

"Fine," I said. "I'll be fine."

"You're sure?" she asked.

"I said so, didn't I?"

We didn't speak the rest of the drive.

"It's going to be busy in here," Marney said as she pulled into a parking space. "Maybe we should try someplace quieter."

"No, we can start here. If it's too much, we'll try something else next time."

Marney reached across the car and put her hand on top of mine. "There's no reason to push yourself. We have time."

"I'll be fine," I said. "You're the one who's been forcing me to grow up. Now it's your turn."

Marney let go of my hand. "Be careful getting out."

I swung the door open and planted my feet on the ground. Marney already stood beside me, breathing heavily. "Let me have your arm," she said, "just for the parking lot. After that you're on your own."

I didn't argue. We moved toward the store, my knees shaking, Marney whispering minor obstacles in my ear. I tried to maneuver naturally. When my feet met the sidewalk in front of the store, I shook my arm loose.

The amazing thing was how I could feel people around me, sense their presence while only seeing vague shapes. Inside, I wouldn't even have the shapes because of the fluorescent lighting. Still, I'd have that extra sense I was slowly acquiring, where my ears heard the low hum of pant legs rubbing together, my body felt the heat of others. It didn't work perfectly yet. Sometimes I didn't even know when Marney entered a room. But it was a beginning.

The doors opened with a whoosh, which seemed louder now, more present.

"The carts are about five feet straight ahead, slightly to your right," Marney whispered.

I moved forward, my right arm extended a little, and felt my hand hit the edge of a cart. I touched the surface, cold metal that had recently been outside, and moved along until I found the plastic handle. I pulled it out, taking a big step back.

Marney moved to my side and said, "Directly to your right."

I maneuvered the cart toward the door and felt my feet move from indoor/outdoor carpet to smooth linoleum. "Okay," I said. "What's first?"

"We need lettuce and mushrooms."

I thought back to the map I'd memorized. Marney had brought it home and quizzed me until I could tell her what each aisle contained. There was no way for me to memorize where each item was located on the shelf, but Marney had been right. I felt more in control knowing the general vicinity of everything.

I started to move to my right, then heard someone cry out at the same time my cart hit an obstacle. I stopped and said, “Are you hurt?” I faced the direction the bump had come from. My face felt warm.

Silence, then a man cleared his throat. “Sorry about that.” I listened to the rustle of his pants as he hurried away.

Marney came to my side and whispered, “You okay?”

“I think I could have run him over and kept going.”

“You should have seen his face. I don’t think he knew what to do.”

“The pleasures of being blind,” I said and smiled. My face was cooling, and I wondered at this new sort of power. “Which first, lettuce or mushrooms?”

At the register, I took out my wallet, a new one with separate sections for different bills. I pulled each one out and held them in the air in front of me until I felt a small tug on the other end. I shoved the change in my pocket for Marney to sort later.

I’d messed up a few times, running into other people or their carts, once even knocking the corner off a display. But I was out in public again. At the door, Marney and I both took hold of the cart’s handle.

We stepped onto the sidewalk, and I leaned my weight on the cart, tired. “The ramp is to your left,” Marney said.

We maneuvered down the small ramp. I chose my steps carefully. The next thing I knew, I tripped and was going down. I loosened my body, let myself fall. My hands

slid across gravel. My face met the ground, and pain exploded in my cheekbone as it grated against the asphalt.

I took my time and felt for pain in each limb before trying to sit up. My face and hands burned, but at least no bones seemed to be broken.

"Agnes, Agnes," Marney said. When I could feel she was close, I said, "I'm fine," but felt warm wetness on my cheek. Reaching my hand up, I felt the blood drip and cover my fingers. I'd given myself more of a cut than I'd suspected. Marney moaned then called out, "Can someone help us? Please?" And then Marney squatted to the ground beside me and began to cry.

I reached toward her with my clean hand and patted her face, first hitting Marney's nose and then caressing her cheek. "It's okay," I said. But I felt the tears on her fingers.

"I'm sorry," Marney managed. "I can't do this."

I heard people approaching us, their footsteps a deep vibration. "But you are doing it. We're doing it."

CHAPTER XIII

THE DANCE*

When Everett appeared in front of Bradley, hair swept back, glasses smudged, Bradley wanted to mess up his own hair, also brushed back. "What's up?" Bradley asked. The gym was draped in streamers, but it looked like someone had TPed the basketball court. The bleachers were shoved back, and the teachers had put little tables all around the dance floor, each one covered in glitter and flowers. No one sat at them. Instead, boys pulled the chairs into groups and bounced a ball back and forth or tried to spit on each other from across the open area.

Bradley scanned the crowd behind Everett's head. The DJ's colored lights shone into his eyes and then moved across people swaying to a Bruno Mars song. It was the same slow song they played at all the dances, where girls snuggled into boys' necks as they moved in tiny circles for four minutes, guys slipping their hands ever lower until the girls dragged them back to their waists. Girls without partners stood in clusters, swaying back and forth, hoping one of the boys would ask them to dance.

"My mom can give you a ride home if you need it," Everett said.

"I'm spending the night at Jeremy's." Bradley kept an eye out for his friends, barely meeting Everett's eye. The two of them had grown up on the same block. At Bradley's end of the street, the houses were old, but people kept their yards trimmed and

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their windows clean. Walking to Everett's, Bradley could see the houses in stages of disrepair, first with chipped paint or a tire-less car in the yard, then with broken windows and furniture on the porch, until he reached Everett's house. It had garbage bags in place of some windows and three cars in the yard, along with an old toilet and claw-foot bathtub. What grass Everett's family had was overgrown with weeds, but most of his yard was packed dirt. Sometimes, Everett's granddad sat on the porch with a can of Stroh's and no shirt.

With their ill fitting clothes and shoes that split at the sole, Everett's family were sturgeons. There was a divide at school between the sturgeons, the poor and unclean, and everyone else. Bradley always tried to keep Everett out of that group by giving him clothes and forgetting sticks of deodorant at his house when he spent the night. Now that they were in junior high, where everyone had more money than either of them, it was all Bradley could do to keep out of the sturgeon group himself. He clung to his new friend Jeremy, and Everett couldn't accept that Bradley was leaving him behind.

"We're still friends, right?" Everett asked.

"I should go," Bradley said. "Clara's probably looking for me." He liked saying her name, wanted to add "my date" but didn't. Jeremy had set them up. When he and Jeremy had climbed out of his mom's mini-van and walked through the door with the girls, everyone had turned to look at them, the only seventh graders to arrive with dates.

"Remember when we used to dance?" Everett said as his face turned different shades of red. "We still could," he said. "I miss you."

"I don't think that would be a good idea," Bradley said.

The previous summer, before coming to Brickton Junior High where the four elementary schools in the county consolidated, they had slow-danced to his mom's old records. Everett, who looked so uncoordinated, was a natural on the dance floor. He helped Bradley, who was not a dancer, learn a few moves so he wouldn't make a fool of himself.

They'd stood on Everett's back porch made of worn, uneven boards. "If you can dance here, you can dance anywhere," he said. "You'll look like you're floating."

They wedged giant speakers, the old kind that popped and sputtered, between the sill and the empty window frame. Sometimes, they had to go inside and wiggle the cords in back to make the sound come out. They grabbed a Patsy Cline record from Everett's mom's collection of 45's and set it up so the song would repeat until they turned it off.

"Let's see what you've got," Everett said and put his hands on Bradley's shoulders. Bradley touched Everett's waist with the tips of his fingers, which seemed more intimate than when they wrestled on his floor and the winner had to pull splinters from the loser's back. Bradley moved his feet from side to side, slowly turning Everett in a circle. After a few seconds, Everett stood back and said, "We have a lot of work to do."

When Bradley said, "I'm not that bad," Everett laughed.

They started with a simple box step, but Bradley stepped on Everett's toes for the first two days. Eventually, he memorized where his feet were supposed to go and learned to lead, which was hard. Everett kept saying, "Guide me," but when Bradley tried, Everett would say, "Don't push." Then, Bradley would shove Everett off the porch.

When he reached for a hand up, Everett would pull Bradley down with him, where they'd wrestle and punch each other until they were too tired to continue. Then, they'd dance again, covered in dirt.

Once Bradley could go a whole song without messing up, Everett said, "Tomorrow, you're going to show me how much you've learned."

"I only know one step."

"And that's all you need," he said.

The following day, Bradley arrived to find Everett wearing dress pants with duct tape covering a hole in the knee. He even wore a tie with his faded button down shirt. "Was I supposed to dress up?" Bradley asked. He wore denim shorts that were getting too tight, but his mom said that since summer was almost over, he didn't need a new pair.

Everett went inside and put the needle on the record, this time Elton John's "Your Song."

Everett stepped into Bradley's arms. "Pretend I'm your girlfriend," Everett said. Bradley put his hands on Everett's hips. "You wouldn't hold your girlfriend like that," Everett said, and Bradley locked his hands around Everett's waist.

They moved together, no missteps, their breath mingling in the space between them. Everett continued to dance, even once the song was over. Then, the record player's arm made a loud clang, and the song began to repeat. Everett stepped closer and kissed Bradley. Everett's lips were warm and chapped, and Bradley felt a heat in his stomach.

"I'm not like that," he said and let go of Everett's waist.

"Okay."

"I think I have the steps down now," Bradley said, already moving away. "Thanks for teaching me. I should go. I forgot, I told my mom I'd mow the grass today."

"Today?" Everett asked.

Bradley nodded and walked off the porch, through the maze of his backyard with its rusted out cars and toys tossed away and forgotten. "She'll be mad if I don't," Bradley said. He walked home fast, his head down, face hot. It had been his first kiss, but he didn't know if he liked it because of that or because it was from Everett.

"Don't you like me?" Everett asked now, the DJ's colored lights playing across his face.

"Like you how?" Bradley caught Jeremy's eye and watched as he pulled Clara and Melanie over, the kind of girls Bradley's mother said were "asking for trouble," both in dresses too short, bright lipstick smeared across their lips. Jeremy hiked his pants up until you could see his hairless calves and pointed at Everett, whose pants stopped well above his ankles. The girls laughed. Bradley turned red. It wasn't Everett's fault his parents couldn't buy him new pants, but Bradley felt guilty all the same. He used to pass his old clothes off to Everett but hadn't since last school year. Everett's shirt was also too small, the sleeves ending above the knobs of his wrists.

"Are we even still friends?"

Before Bradley could answer, Clara appeared behind Everett and smiled at Bradley. Then, she crouched, grabbed the legs of Everett's pants, her red nails vivid against the faded black cloth, and yanked them to the floor.

Bradley stepped back from the guffaws and watched Everett's face turn red as he bent to pull up his pants, tighty whiteys on display. Teachers' flashlight beams cut through the darkness, revealing stains on the back of Everett's underwear and setting off another round of laughter, but Bradley ignored it. Mr. Higgins, the principal, put his arm around Everett and started to lead him away from the crowd. Bradley stepped toward them, then stopped. Everett shrugged the principal off. "It was an accident," he said.

The principal looked at him, and Everett met his eye. Mr. Higgins looked away first and scanned the circle of onlookers. His eyes stopped on Jeremy, who was still grinning, but moved past Clara who had now edged her way next to Bradley. She grabbed his hand. He didn't let go but didn't hold on either.

"You're sure?" Mr. Higgins asked.

Everett nodded and turned away. The principal turned off the flashlight but watched as Everett walked across the floor, head held high but not meeting anyone's eye.

"Enjoy that?" Melanie asked. She and Jeremy stood in front of Bradley and Clara, still grinning. Melanie, an eighth grader, was even more popular than Clara, and Jeremy hadn't let go of her hand all night. Mr. Higgins even caught them kissing during a slow song.

"You should leave him alone," Bradley said.

"What?" Jeremy yelled above the music. "We shouldn't pick on your boyfriend?" He said it loud enough that dancers glanced over at them.

"He's not my boyfriend," Bradley said. He looked at Everett who stood on the edge of the dance floor alone.

"What are you doing with a sturgeon?" Clara asked, and Bradley realized that she'd let go of his hand and now stood beside Melanie, the three of them forming a wall in front of him. "You bathe, don't you?" She sniffed the air around him.

"I'm not dirty," he said. "And neither is he."

"Look at him," Clara said. "He's filthy."

Everett was poor, that was obvious, but he showered and kept his clothes clean, even if he couldn't help when they didn't fit.

"I don't hang out with him. Not anymore."

"You sure?" Clara asked.

"Not in a while."

"That's cause you're our friend," Jeremy said and slung his arm over Bradley's shoulder. "Right?"

"Yeah." And he was, because Jeremy had taken him in right after he started at Brickton, told the other boys that he was okay, cool even. The boys had begun inviting him over to their houses for pool parties, and Bradley owed them. He'd never been in any pool but the pee filled public one he went to with Everett. Clara had only looked at Bradley with his Salvation Army clothes when Jeremy had said he was starting a new

trend with old jeans and t-shirts no one else wanted. Jeremy called Bradley retro, and the others believed it.

"Prove it," Clara said.

"Prove what?"

"Prove you're not his friend," she said, "and I'll kiss you."

"Okay," he said.

Clara leaned in. "Walk over to him and kick him in the nuts as hard as you can."

"Won't that hurt him?" Bradley asked.

"Just for a few minutes," Clara said. "He'll crumple and cry for his mommy. It'll be funny."

"Not really," Bradley said and looked to the others, but they followed along with Clara, laughing, Jeremy already cupping his own balls.

He looked over his shoulder and saw Everett still standing on the edge of the dance floor, watching Bradley and his friends. He looked back to Jeremy, who smiled and raised his eyebrows. Bradley nodded and walked toward his old friend. Everett looked away as he approached, but Bradley stood in front of him and smiled.

"We're still friends," he said.

"Not really," Everett said and looked over Bradley's shoulder. He turned and saw his friends had inched closer and were watching.

"We can hang out tomorrow," Bradley said.

Everett looked at him, a half smile on his lips, and shook his head. "You don't have to pretend. It's okay if you don't like me anymore."

Bradley was almost mad at Everett and the way his eyes darted between him and his friends.

"Your friends are waiting for you," Everett said and cocked his head toward Jeremy and the girls.

"You're my friend too."

"You're not acting like it."

Bradley realized he was in Everett's space, toes meeting toes, his voice too loud, breath in his friend's face. He stepped back, unclenched his fists, took a deep breath.

"You know they're not really your friends," Everett said. "If you don't do what they tell you, they won't hang out with you anymore."

"How would you know?" Bradley asked. "It's not like they'd even talk to you."

"Then do it," Everett said. "Whatever it is, you can't say no to them."

"No," Bradley said. "I can't."

Everett's hands shook, and Bradley watched the way his friend clenched his eyes shut, opening himself to whatever Bradley had to offer. Their breaths were shallow, almost in unison. Bradley turned back to his friends who nodded and pretended to kick, their legs cutting through the air. Everett's eyes were still closed, and his lips moved silently. Bradley pulled his leg back, took a deep breath, and stopped. He watched Everett's chest rise and fall, his heart fluttering against his skinny chest, afraid and determined all at once. The way it did when he slept, his heart beating against his ribs. Bradley didn't move.

He glanced down at the floor and back to his old friend. Everett would never have asked him to kick Jeremy in the balls. He looked back to his new friends, Clara making kissing faces at him. Mr. Higgins moved through the dancers, pulling couples apart when they got too close. The DJ's lights flashed and flickered across the gym, the lingering smell of socks and sweat out of place. He looked back to Everett, whose eyes were now open, watching him without expression.

Bradley balled his hands into fists, pulled his foot back, and swung his leg forward as hard as he could. The toe of his shoe mashed into Everett's crotch. Everett's eyes widened before his legs folded underneath him, and he curled into the fetal position, both hands cupping his crotch. Tears ran down his cheeks as he rocked back and forth on the floor.

Bradley watched Everett's agony and couldn't move. Jeremy and the girls crowded in on him, slapping him on the back. Clara wrapped her arms around his neck and planted a kiss on his mouth, but Bradley didn't return it. His mouth remained slack, his eyes on Everett who lay still. Mr. Higgins came forward, knelt beside him and said something, but Everett didn't respond. Instead, he turned his head to the side and vomited.

Students backed up, whispering, their eyes darting between Bradley and Everett. Clara took hold of Bradley's hand and tried to pull him away, but Bradley was rooted to the floor, paralyzed. He let go of Clara's hand, and she backed away and joined the others. A circle of students had formed around Everett, Mr. Higgins, and Bradley. He stared at his friend's prone body, then at the group. They stared back at him. Bradley

pushed his way through the circle. Once outside the group that surrounded Everett, Bradley ran. Across the gym, out the double doors, and into the night. Bradley stopped at the edge of the road, took a gulp of air, and vomited into the gutter. Then, he sat on the curb and waited for someone to claim him.

CHAPTER XIV

HOME INVASION*

Jamie had taken off her coat and put it in the closet before she realized that two men she didn't know were sitting on her couch. They were drinking her beer, eating her chips, and watching her TV. She froze, one shoe still on her foot, the other on the mat by the door. She took them in: one around fifty with blonde-gray hair, the other thirty-ish with a scar that pulled his lip into a sneer. They both wore polo shirts and khakis, no tattoos, no piercings. Not what burglars are supposed to look like.

The younger, dark haired one said, "Want a beer?" and held out a bottle of Dead Man.

She slid her shoe back on, stepped forward, and took the beer but didn't open it. "What are you doing in my house?"

The older guy who hadn't looked away from the soap opera on the TV looked at her now and said, "I'm Nelson. He's Mitchell." Nelson and Mitchell looked at one another and stood. Jamie stepped back, gripped the bottle tighter.

"Take it easy," Mitchell said. "We're leaving." He held up his hands as though in surrender. The two men walked past her and out the front door, closing it behind them.

Her legs folded under her. She reached for her phone but stopped – she was in Morgantown, WV, 1,500 miles from her friends and family. She opened the beer, which

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foamed out of the top and onto the carpet, then took a long swig. She knew she should call the police, but what would they do? Send a car past her house and then forget about her? Besides, they weren't real burglars. They didn't break anything or take anything except her beer. If they'd done something, she would call, but she and her house were fine. Their show still played on the TV, something she'd never seen before, so Jamie brought her mani/pedi kit to the living room and fixed her nails while watching the rest of the episode.

Her nails were the first step toward prepping for First Friday, the once a month gathering of young professionals on the Southside. Some of the women she worked with had invited her to meet them there, and she was learning that making friends was much easier when you move for college. When you take a job in a new place, you spend a lot of nights staring at the white walls of your rental home, and this was the first time anyone had invited her anywhere. This Friday was the last gathering until spring, as it would be too cold once November hit, and she was determined to make a connection with the girls. They were friends, had known one another for years, and Jamie wanted to be one of them.

She painted her toes a bright red, though no one would see them in closed shoes. She kept her fingernails a more subdued nude. She still subscribed to her mom's warning that bright nails made the wrong statement. Jamie figured once a man got her shoes off, it was okay to announce your intentions.

In bed, she lay awake, wondering if she'd really locked all the doors and windows. After an hour of waking from a half-sleep every time the house creaked, she

got up and checked all the locks, even though she'd done the same thing just before lying down. They were already locked, as they'd been the first time she checked, and she wondered how those men got inside. Maybe she should have called the police. She'd ask the girls' advice at work.

The next day, they were both on the couch when she walked in, watching the same show. "What are you doing?" she asked, and they stood. "This is my house."

"It's not your house," Nelson said. "You rent it."

"It's still mine as long as I pay each month."

He seemed to think about this for a minute and then nodded. "We just want to watch some TV."

"Then do it at your house," she said.

Nelson shook his head and said, "Can't."

"Then why not someone else's house? Why mine?"

"It's not like you're using it during the day. You're at work," Nelson said.

"Besides," Mitchell added, "we're security. No one will break in when we're here."

"But you broke in," she said.

"No we didn't," Nelson said. "We have a key."

"What?"

"We're sorry," Mitchell said. "We'll go."

"Wait," Jamie said. "Tell me how you have a key."

"You don't think you're the only one who ever rented this house, do you?" Nelson asked.

"There could be hundreds of keys floating all over the city," Mitchell added. "You'd never even know."

"You didn't change the locks, did you?" Nelson asked.

Come to think of it, she hadn't.

"You could come home one day to find all the old tenants here," Mitchell said.

Like the day before, they tried to walk around her, but Jamie put her hands against the door jamb, blocking their passage, and said, "Wait." They both stopped, but without saying anything, they walked away from her, through the living room and into the kitchen, Nelson in the lead with Mitchell behind. Before disappearing from view, Mitchell turned his head and grinned at her, showing dimples. Her arms still blocking the doorway, Jamie heard the back door open and then slam shut.

This time, the kitchen table was empty of beer cans. She opened the door to the fridge and saw that they'd replaced what they'd drank the day before plus an extra six-pack. On the counter lay two bags of chips. She grabbed a beer from the fridge and took a sip. It was good. She sat at the table with her beer and chips, listening to the final minutes of their show.

She thought about calling a locksmith but didn't. She'd talk to the landlord later, let him pay for changing the locks. She would ask him about past tenants. Jamie changed into an old t-shirt and dyed her hair. Normally a mousy brown, she wanted something more vibrant for Friday. While the color set, she took out her waxing kit and put it in the

microwave. She slathered the yellow goop across her brow and upper lip and pressed strips of cloth to her skin. Gritting her teeth, she pulled the strips off in one motion, removing the hair and setting her nerves on fire. Jamie reminded herself that the end result would be worth it, that if this Friday worked out, she might have plans for next Friday.

When she came home the next day, no one spoke. She walked in, they stood and walked past her, closing the door behind them. Then, she grabbed the Flying Dog they'd left for her and finished watching their show.

The two men were growing on her. She liked Mitchell's quiet demeanor, that Nelson treated him like a son, could be his father. The fact that one of them had taken an old photo of her from atop the TV and set it on the coffee table. It was almost like having friends.

When Friday finally came, Jamie stood by the bar holding a glass of wine that she sipped from occasionally. Her red toes peeked out from the heels she'd slipped on with her jeans. She eyed the people around the room, exactly the same as they'd been in the last two places she walked into, groups who already knew each other huddled together. She liked this bar better than the others, with its soft lighting and tinkle of piano music coming through the speakers.

The women from work were gathered in a small circle, Jamie on the edge, though she felt that she could be standing outside of their group altogether. When they

laughed, she smiled, though they paid her no attention. She scanned the room on tiptoe, as though she were looking for someone, and wondered why these women ignored her. She'd done everything right, played by their rules, yet she didn't belong.

"Jamie?" a man said behind her. She turned, and Nelson smiled at her. "Mitchell and I have a table over here, if you'd like to join us."

She followed him across the room to a corner booth where the two men sat, a bucket of beers in front of them. Mitchell smiled and slid over.

"I'm Jamie," she said, "but you already know that. I don't really know you, but I can't tell you how great it is to see familiar faces."

Nelson smiled. "We saw your mail."

"I meant to tell you, I like your hair," Mitchell said and blushed.

No one said anything else. The silence drew out, and Jamie looked across the room, seeing groups talking over top of one another. The girls from work didn't seem to notice she was gone. Mitchell pulled out a deck of cards. "Five card draw?" he asked.

She nodded, and he dealt. Nelson handed her a beer. "We play til it's gone," he said, and no one talked for next hour as they played hand after hand, betting with pennies. Jamie kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her. She was glad for the silent companionship.

When she unlocked her door on Monday afternoon, Nelson and Mitchell were on her couch again, leaning forward, their attention riveted by the show. Nelson saw her first and started to rise, but she waved him back down. She walked to the couch.

“Scoot,” she said, and the men made room for her on the end. She grabbed one of the beers, slick with condensation, and tipped it back, draining half of it in one gulp.

They passed the bag of chips along the length of the couch, their eyes never leaving the TV. She grabbed a bunch before handing the bag back to Mitchell, and they passed it back and forth until the chips were gone. The three beers making her a little tipsy, Jamie slid her greasy hand into Mitchell’s. At first it just lay there, but then he squeezed back. Whenever a couple on the show hugged or kissed, she gave his hand another squeeze.

CHAPTER XV

DIRTY GIRL

"There's something in my hair," Melody said. She ran toward her mother, scratching her head. "It itches."

"It's sand," Sophie said. They'd been at the playground for almost an hour already, and Melody had spent most of that time in the sandbox.

"Sand doesn't hurt," Melody said.

Sophie bent her ear forward and saw black spots. Almost like pepper flakes, but they were eggs. Which would hatch into lice. Some already crawled through Melody's hair and across her scalp.

"I don't see anything," Sophie said. Her voice was high, breathless.

"But it itches," Melody said. She used both hands now, scratching furiously.

"Stop it," Sophie said. She grabbed her daughter's hands, pinned them to her sides.

"Let go, Mom." Melody tried to wriggle out of Sophie's grasp.

"We're leaving," Sophie whispered. "You can scratch all you want in the car."

"I don't wanna go," Melody said, her lower lip poking out. "We were playing a game."

Sophie and Melody came to this park almost every Sunday. It had become an informal gathering for most of the families in the neighborhood, where moms watched over their kids on the playground while dads grilled hotdogs and talked about hunting

and fishing. Sophie always brought a packet of hotdogs and buns, and one of the dads cooked them for her, as she was the only single mother in the group. Then, she sat with the other moms and watched over the kids, breaking up fights when necessary and talking about anyone who wasn't there.

Most of Sophie's friends were at the park. They lived next door to each other and helped one another out when something went wrong. They were also incurable gossips, and the last thing Sophie needed was someone blaming her for a lice outbreak in the neighborhood. No one would call her daughter a dirty girl.

"We're leaving," she repeated quietly. Melody started crying, big blubbery sobs, and the other moms were looking at her now. "We have to go," she said to them.

"Is everything okay?" someone called.

"What about your lunch?" someone else asked.

"We're okay," Sophie said. "I forgot something. We're supposed to be somewhere."

She grabbed Melody's hand, but the girl sunk to the ground, tears spilling down her cheeks, sobs wracking her entire body. Everyone was staring now. Sophie bent down, picked up her daughter, and carried her to the car, Melody screaming, "I don't wanna. I don't wanna," the whole way.

Sophie didn't look back at the others who were all staring at her, no doubt. They'd talk about her after she left, but that was the least of her worries. She hated lice, the pain that went along with getting rid of the nits. Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them away. She could get through this. They were just bugs.

She buckled Melody into her booster seat and waved at the other mothers, who were still watching her, before she jumped in the driver's seat. She backed out and sped away from the parking lot, driving two blocks before pulling onto a side road and stopping the car. Melody still wailed in the back seat, gasping sobs that shook her body. Sophie took an antiseptic wipe from her purse and ran it over her hands, in between her fingers, and up her forearms. She tried not to think about the shampoo and fine-toothed comb and medicinal smell still awaiting her.

When she was ten, Sophie had gone to her own mother complaining of an itchy head. Her mom had found a mass of lice in Sophie's hair, her scalp red and raw from bites and scratching, lice eggs covering the backs of her ears. "Only dirty girls get lice," she'd said. "No daughter of mine is going to be a dirty girl." After a trip to the drug store, Sophie had sat in the tub and cried while her mother scrubbed her head with foul smelling shampoo and then forced a metal comb with sharp teeth through her hair. By nine o'clock, Sophie's bedtime, her mother had run out of patience. She pulled a pair of scissors from her sewing box and cut chunks out of Sophie's hair until it was all gone, and her scalp showed through in places.

In the morning, Sophie woke to find clumps of hair still on the bathroom floor. When she looked in the mirror, she cried. Her mom blamed Sophie for the haircut, said if she weren't such a dirty girl, she wouldn't have been forced to do it. Then, she cried too and took Sophie to a salon in the mall for a woman to fix her hair, but there wasn't a lot the hairdresser could do. "Come back when it grows out a bit," she said.

Sophie wouldn't leave Melody with that same stigma. She would shampoo her daughter's hair and comb it again and again, as many times as she had to. And she wouldn't dig the teeth into her daughter's scalp. She'd be gentle and make sure her own daughter wasn't traumatized. She wouldn't call her daughter dirty or let anyone think of her that way.

Now, along with her wailing, Melody had begun to kick Sophie's seat. "Stop it," Sophie screamed, and for a moment Melody was silent. Shocked, probably. Sophie never yelled. But Melody's tantrum wasn't over, only on pause. The little girl took in a gulp of air before continuing her assault on Sophie's eardrums and kidneys. "We'll go to the park," Sophie said. "We'll play for another hour. If you'll just be quiet." And as quick as that, Melody's screams subsided, and the kicking stopped. Sophie pulled into traffic again.

"The park's the other way," Melody said and suppressed a sob.

"We're going to a different one."

"Why?"

"You have lice," Sophie said. "I don't want you to give it to everyone."

"What's lice?"

"Bugs," Sophie said. "You have bugs in your hair."

Melody began to sniffle again. "Bugs?" she asked, her voice watery with tears.

"It's okay, though," Sophie said quickly. "We'll fix them when we get home. But first, we'll go to the park. You can swing on the swings. I'll push you for a whole hour if you want."

Melody clapped her hands and was quiet. Sophie drove through town, almost to the other end of Brickton, to the area where she'd grown up. Manwell Park, behind the House of Tires, had a good play structure – lots of swings, three slides, the whole thing covered in a canopy to keep the summer sun off the plastic. At least she told herself that was the reason she chose this park. Sophie also knew that Justine, her childhood friend, would probably be there – she ran the park's Sunday playgroup.

Sophie pulled into the lot and saw that the play structure was crawling with kids, mothers grouped on benches as they watched the children play. Melody squealed. "Go for it," Sophie said. Melody opened the back door and jumped to the ground. She ran toward the play structure, hair streaming behind her. Sophie sat behind the wheel and closed her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was cut off all of Melody's hair – she'd only ever trimmed the split ends, and Melody's hair reached her waist. It was beautiful, prettier than Sophie's had been when her mom cut hers.

Sophie opened her eyes and stepped out of the car. There was one empty bench, and she sat there, keeping her eye on Sophie who whispered in another girl's ear, spreading lice no doubt, before following a little boy to the top of the slide and then trying to climb the rock wall. When they left, Sophie would stop by the drug store and pick up the shampoo. At home, she'd have to wash Melody's sheets and pillowcases, boil her hairbrush and throw away her ponytail holders. Afterward, Sophie would have to wash her own hair in the special shampoo and hope she didn't already have lice.

Sophie heard Melody's cry of pain and jumped up, scanning the faces of the children, not sure where she'd last seen her daughter. She spotted her beside the swings.

Melody held onto the rubber seat with both arms, while a girl pulled her hair. Sophie ran toward them, but another mother got there first.

"Eva," the woman yelled. "Stop it!"

The girl let go of Melody's hair, and Sophie scooped up her little girl, who bawled into her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry—" the woman began and stopped. "Sophie?"

Sophie looked at her for the first time and saw her childhood friend in the face of a much older, much heavier woman. "Justine."

Justine was the one who'd given Sophie lice. When they were girls, Sophie spent more time at her friend's house than her own. Sophie's own parents were going through a divorce, and Justine's house was always fun. They had four dogs and a ferret, all inside animals that slept with Justine at night. The ferret had a litter box and was like a cat. For over a year, while her parents battled one another over every detail of their divorce, Sophie spent weekends at Justine's house, where she was welcomed and treated like a member of the family.

Once her parents' property was divided and her father had moved to Florida with vague plans for Sophie to visit him the next summer, Sophie's mom decided her daughter needed to spend more time at home. The lice episode happened that first weekend, and once Sophie's head was bald and the bugs were gone, her mom had said, "I don't want you hanging out with Justine anymore. She's a dirty girl. You'll just bring home more lice."

"She's my best friend," Sophie had cried, but her mom wouldn't relent.

At first, Sophie still talked to Justine in school, but soon someone else supplanted her as Justine's best friend.

"You gave me lice," was the only thing Sophie could think to say now.

"What?" Justine asked.

"You gave me lice," Sophie said again. "When we were ten. I wasn't allowed to hang out with you anymore."

"I haven't seen you in fifteen years, and that's what you say?" Justine tossed her red hair over her shoulder. She squatted in front of her daughter and held her chin in her hand. "I want you to apologize to the little girl," she said.

"She took my swing," the girl said.

"Melody?" Sophie asked. Her daughter had her face buried in Sophie's neck, but she was still holding onto the swing with her arm.

Melody shook her head and looked up. "I was here first," she whispered.

"It doesn't matter," Sophie said. "Look." She pointed at a second empty swing.

Melody sat in one, Justine's daughter in the other. Sophie and Justine pushed them from behind. At first they didn't speak. Then, Justine said, "I didn't think we ever figured out who gave lice to who."

"It was from your ferret," Sophie said. "That rodent slept with us all the time."

"We washed Chuckie. He took baths with the dogs."

"Well, your house always was kind of dirty," Sohpie said. "It could have come from anywhere."

Justine's face turned red. "My parents didn't have much money."

“That doesn’t have anything to do with being clean.”

“My mom worked two jobs. So did my dad,” Justine said. “They were more worried about spending time with me and you and my brothers when they were home.”

“Me? Why me?”

“Your parents were splitting up. They were worried.”

Justine’s mom did spend a lot time with the two of them when Sophie started sleeping over. She remembered baking apples and carving pumpkins, roller skating and pizza parties. “She could have at least run the vacuum or wiped off the table,” Sophie said.

“Are you serious?” Justine asked.

“What did I say?” Sophie asked.

“My parents raised you for almost a year, and you complain?”

“They didn’t raise me.”

“Bullshit,” Justine said. She spat the word. “You can believe what you want. You always have.”

“And what does that mean?”

“You think we weren’t friends because of the lice?” Justine asked. She stopped pushing her daughter’s swing. She faced Sophie, fists on her hips. “That’s a laugh. You were weird. I only hung out with you because my mom said I had to. I had to be nice to you because your dad left.”

"Yeah?" Sophie said. Her face was red, her eyes full of tears. She turned away from Melody's swing, toward Justine. "I hope your daughter gets lice. I hope you have to cut off all her hair like my mom did mine."

Justine looked furious. "What's wrong with you?" she asked. "You can't say that."

Sophie smiled. "I just did."

By now, Melody's swing had stopped, and her daughter stood. She scratched at her head.

"Does your daughter have lice?" Justine asked. "She's scratching."

"Of course not," Sophie said. "I'm not like you. I don't give lice to other girls."

Sophie sat beside the bathtub, dishwashing gloves on her hands, as she scrubbed the shampoo into Melody's hair.

"It stinks," Melody said.

"It used to burn too," Sophie said. "Consider yourself lucky."

She shook a sweaty lock of hair out of her eyes. This was the third time she'd applied the shampoo. The bottle said not to do it more than once in a day, but Melody had so much hair Sophie didn't know what else to do. She'd bought all five bottles of it from the drug store, unsure that one would be enough.

"Tilt your head back," she said and turned on the spigot. She held Melody's head under the water, careful to keep the shampoo out of her eyes.

"One more time with the comb," she said.

“Do we have to?” Melody asked. She’d been in the tub for two hours. Her fingers and toes were shriveled like raisins.

“Unless you want me to cut all your hair off.”

Melody turned her back to Sophie and let her coax the comb through her wet hair. She screeched when it hurt too badly and sobbed a few times, but Sophie thought she did a good job. Still, her daughter had so much hair – there was no way she could get all the nits out. At least not tonight. It was past Melody’s bedtime, and they were both tired. Sophie had already done three loads of laundry, and she hadn’t even started on her own bedding.

“That’s enough for now,” Sophie said. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

In the morning, Sophie stood at the counter and watched Melody eat her cereal. Sophie was tired, hadn’t slept well, dreaming of bugs burrowing into her brain all night. “Did you get my stuff for school spirit week?” Melody asked around a mouthful of food.

“What stuff?”

“I gave you the note from my teacher,” Melody said. “We’re supposed to dress up this week.”

Sophie looked on the fridge. There, right in the middle, was a list of this week’s events. It said, “Monday: Hat Day! Show your school spirit!”

“It’s too late—” she started but stopped. Melody’s school was the Brickton Bandits, and their mascot was a raccoon. “I’ll be right back. Finish your cereal. And stop scratching,” she added.

"I can't help it," Melody said, but Sophie was already down the hall and in Melody's room. She threw toys out of her daughter's toy box until she found what she was looking for – a bunch of squirrel tails. Some of the dads at the park liked to eat squirrel, and when they went hunting, they'd cut the tails off where they met the animal's body and give them to the kids at the playground. All the kids would run around trailing those tails behind them. At the end of the day, each of them brought one home. For a while, you could still bend them and feel the vertebrae move individually. Eventually, the sinews would dry up, leaving them hardened, and Melody would lose interest. Then, they'd get lost in her toy box.

Sophie went to her own room and found an old Brickton High ball cap in her closet. She took it and the tails into the kitchen and looked in the junk drawer until she found a stapler.

"What are you doing?" Melody asked.

"You're gonna be a bandit," Sophie said.

"Those are squirrel tails," she said, "not raccoons."

"No one will know the difference."

Sophie stapled four tails to the back of the hat and put it on Melody's head. "There," she said. The tails hung down her back, and Melody's hair clung to them. "You look great."

"Really?" Melody asked.

"Really," Sophie said. "I bet you win the contest for best hat."

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It was almost ten when the principal called. Sophie was cleaning a patient's teeth and asked another hygienist to take a message. "He wants you to stop in at the end of the day," the woman told her. "He said it's not an emergency."

Sophie swore quietly. She was surprised he didn't ask her to pick Melody up immediately. Maybe the school nurse treated lice. If so, that would make Sophie's life easier. She could go in, pretend to be surprised, and leave with a nit-free daughter.

Later that day, Sophie put on an innocent face before stepping into the principal's office. Melody ran straight to her, and hugged her around the waist. Sophie hugged her back, started to bend down to kiss the top of her head, and thought better of it.

"Ms. Cooper," the principal said. "Have a seat." He waved toward a chair in front of his desk. Melody perched on her lap.

"Is everything okay?" Sophie asked.

"Fine, fine," he said. "I just want to talk for a minute." He pulled a ziplock bag out from under his desk. Inside lay Melody's hat with the squirrel tails.

Sophie looked from the hat to the principal and back.

"Did you know squirrels carry lice, Ms. Cooper?" the principal asked.

"What?" she asked.

"Squirrels," he said again. "They carry lice, and lice is a big problem in schools. It spreads quickly."

Sophie nodded.

"Melody's teacher took her hat this morning and gave it to me," he continued. "I hope you understand."

When she was a girl, Sophie's own father had given her squirrel tails after he went hunting. Sophie took them to Justine's house. There, they would tie a string to them and run around the house trailing the tails behind them. They'd swing them in the air, hitting each other in the face with them. Then, when the tails dried up and didn't bend anymore, the girls would attach them to their ponytail holders, turning them into accessories. Sophie laughed at the memory.

"Thank you," Sophie said. She smiled and took the bag from him. "Thank you very, very much."

She grabbed Melody's hand and turned away from the principal.

"You really should check your daughter's hair," the principal called as they walked out of the office. "Just in case."

"Of course," she called over her shoulder. She felt light, lighter than she had in a long time.

CHAPTER XVI

PHOTOGRAPHING THE DEAD

Silas Morgan saw the living in the dead and created something none of us could. When he was a child, if someone had told us how much we'd come to rely on him in years to come, we wouldn't have believed them. Through third grade, Silas never had a friend, but he didn't seem to mind. His own company was enough. In fourth grade, though, he fell in love with his teacher Anita Pelland. She was already in her sixties by then and smelled of talcum powder. A lot of us had worked our way through elementary school with her at the head of the classroom. A few of us had adored her, but no one ever admitted to loving her before Silas – what with her bulging eyes and the thin layer of hair on her upper lip. Still, Silas brought her love letters and small presents throughout the school year. When he wrapped his mom's diamond earrings for Anita Pelland's Christmas present, she had to set up a meeting with his parents and the principal. "His attentions are innocent," she told us later. "Cute really. I hated to bring everyone into it." After their meeting, Silas still mooned over her, but from afar. On the last day of school, he cried when he said goodbye, though he would continue to see her in town and at school as he always had.

Silas was fifteen when Doug Brickman, the English teacher down at the high school, passed out cameras for a class project. The students brought back what Doug had expected: family shots, pictures of dogs, cats, blurry birds. Silas did too, but his birds weren't blurry – they were detailed and graceful. His dogs leapt in the air, and his cats

eyed the lens warily. Doug displayed the students' pictures for the school's open house, but we only noticed Silas's. Even people who didn't have kids in tenth grade stopped to look at his photographs. That night, we began to realize that Silas wasn't odd. He was special.

His parents certainly thought so. They bought him a 35mm Nikon at the local pawn shop, and from that day on, we never saw him without a camera around his neck. We'd walk outside and see him aiming his lens at our gardens or trees in our yards. He went to the Brickton High School football games and asked to stand on the sidelines to get better shots. From the stands, we watched him in his too-big yellow slicker, which he wore rain or shine. At the beginning of the first quarter, his right pocket bulged with unused canisters of film, but by the end his left pocket was full of used ones. Once, Glenda Edelmeier swore she watched him shoot twenty rolls of film, not including the halftime show.

Doug Brickman watched Silas use two rolls of film shooting people who walked out of the Rite Aid before stopping him. Silas took Doug's parting words to heart: "Take pictures of things that aren't in front of you all the time. Look for something no one else sees."

Silas seemed to think about that advice, because even though he still kept the camera around his neck, none of us saw him take another picture until last year when he showed up at Anita Pelland's funeral. We didn't think anything about his arrival, as he'd stopped by her classroom everyday until she retired. Besides, she'd taught long division to over half the town. We were all there.

For anyone who'd seen her in the previous year, the viewing was a relief. Instead of wearing diapers and having to be spoon-fed pureed meals, her hair and face were made up, and she was wearing her special occasions dress – the one with the tiny cluster of lilacs twining their way around the navy fabric. It might be wrong to speak ill of the dead, but until everyone saw her dressed up like that, it was as if we'd forgotten who we were supposed to mourn.

Silas walked to the front of the room with his camera out, lens cap swinging. He moved around the casket taking pictures. He stepped close, and we were a little horrified. It's one thing to shoot a football game. It's another to invade the privacy of the dead. When he stepped back to get a wider angle, we waited for Anita's son Samuel to stop him, but he didn't. Silas replaced the lens cap and shook Samuel's hand. There were whispered conversations all over the room.

Two weeks later, Samuel held an open house and invited all of his mom's former students, which, once you added in spouses and children, included most of us. There, we saw what had happened to Silas's pictures. Samuel had one shot blown up, framed, and placed over the mantle, right beside a picture of his father. Somehow, Silas had captured Anita in the best possible way, so that she didn't look like a dead body all made up but like a woman who was proud to look her best, who kept teaching well into her retirement years because she liked children that much. He'd managed to erase the last years of her life, and she looked like the woman we remembered.

After that, it became commonplace to see Silas at all the funerals in town. For a while, some still objected, saying the pictures were blasphemous, but in the end,

everyone saw their worth. Eventually, nearly all of us had a picture of a lost loved one framed and placed in a prominent position in the house. When people came to funerals from out of town, they were surprised to see Silas, but we explained that without him, we had no memories. Silas kept our dead alive.

When Harvey Millman drowned in the river and was pulled out bloated and broken, Mr. Masters fixed him up enough for an open casket. At the viewing we could see that Harvey's face was messed up something awful and that it'd taken quite a bit of putty and makeup to mask his injuries. Some said Silas wouldn't be able to use those pictures, but he worked his usual magic and made Harvey look like he would sit up and challenge someone to a game of pickup if we waited just a minute.

It's not that Silas suddenly became normal, but with a camera in his hands, we could overlook his oddities. He still didn't have friends. He ate his lunch alone in the school cafeteria, and he never held a conversation for more than a couple minutes unless it was about photography. Still, we loved him as much as we could. He showed the appropriate respect at funerals and never charged a cent for all his hard work, though we tipped him whenever he brought us pictures of our loved ones – more if we had it, less if we didn't.

Everything changed when Ellen Draper's family moved to town. By then, Silas had begun growing into his looks, and we could see the man he'd become. Apparently, Ellen saw his potential too. Her first day at school, she walked into the cafeteria and placed her lunch tray opposite Silas's. The kids around them watched Ellen say hi, and

Silas returned her greeting. They didn't talk much at first, but she sat at his table every day, and pretty soon they were together all the time.

Once she arrived, Silas stopped carrying his camera. Then, he missed a funeral. Janice Evans was the first one who didn't get a funeral picture. Neither did Justin Stephens or Nathan Travers, who died when their cars collided head-on. Or Sara Jane Dawes who was only four and drowned in the creek. But when Silas didn't come to Doug Brickman's funeral, we knew we'd lost him.

During the funerals, Silas and Ellen went to high school basketball games and made out in darkened theaters. They drank pots of coffee at Mom's Place, a diner twenty minutes down the road, and danced too close at the spring formal. Silas talked to the other kids at school and answered questions in his classes. He taught Ellen to drive the stick shift in his old Buick, and she laughed at his corny jokes. He was normal, and we were happy for him, but we missed him. It was a trade-off.

When summer arrived, he and Ellen spent most days at Curtisville Dam, bathing suits on, fishing poles in hand. They joined the sea of teenagers who spent their mornings swimming and catching trout for lunch, turning grassy banks into a beach with transplanted sand and a volleyball court.

Thomas Martin said the Buick made it all the way to the bottom before it hit a walnut tree. He couldn't see what caused the wreck, but he saw the car swerve and disappear over the hill. Thomas held onto branches and dug the sides of his feet into upturned earth to get to the car. Silas stepped out of the driver's side, his nose bloody. When Ellen didn't get out, Thomas expected the worst. He got to the passenger side

window, where Ellen sat with her hands resting in her lap, as though she didn't realize what had happened. The windshield was cracked, and a knot had already formed on her forehead. Otherwise, she looked fine.

Still, Thomas drove them to the emergency room. The doctor set Silas's broken nose, diagnosed both of them with concussions, and sent them home with ice packs for their foreheads and directives to wear their seatbelts in the future.

The next morning, Silas went to her house and knocked like he did everyday, but Ellen didn't answer the door. Silas knocked again, and when she still didn't answer, he sat on her porch and waited. None of us saw Ellen in town that day, but we spotted Silas on Ellen's front steps, head in hands, as though trying to figure out what he'd done wrong. When her parents came home from work, he was still there. He stayed on the porch and waited, while they went inside.

A little later, everyone on the block heard the screams that arose from inside the house. By the time the coroner showed up, we all knew what had happened: Ellen had gone to bed the night before and never woken up. Silas stayed on those steps until late in the night, staring through us all. The coroner, the police, her family – everyone walked around him.

Later, we'd find out that the car accident had caused more than a concussion. The coroner called it a hematoma, said it killed her. None of us wanted to admit it, but our sadness was mixed with glee. Her death was the only thing that would bring Silas back where he belonged, to us.

We all stared when Silas walked into the funeral home. His camera hung over his shoulder, and we watched in silence as he knelt in front of Ellen's casket. Though Mr. Masters had done a good job fixing her up, her forehead still had a lump from smashing into the windshield. Silas leaned forward and kissed her lips, before sitting back and staring at her. We watched the tears drip from the end of his nose onto the velvet top of the kneeler.

Ellen's parents sat at the head of the casket, two chairs set up for them to receive people, but Silas didn't turn to them. Instead, he pulled his camera from his shoulder and put it to his face. He winced when the camera touched his broken nose. We watched him frame his first shot and knew Silas would do something wonderful with Ellen. He stood close enough that only her head would be in the picture, her hair fanned out around her face on that white velvet pillow. Silas clicked the shutter, but before he could frame another, Ellen's father stood and grabbed Silas's shoulder from behind. When he whirled around, Mr. Draper punched Silas's already broken nose. None of us moved, and everyone within ten feet of them later swore they heard Silas's nose break again. Blood poured from both nostrils, wetting his shirt and dripping onto the carpet, but Silas didn't try to staunch the flow. Mr. Draper stood back, his arms at his sides, his chest heaving, as he stared at Silas.

Silas held his gaze. Then, he turned to the crowd, scanned the room, nodded at all of us, and walked down the aisle between the folding chairs and out the front door. Mr. Draper's shoulders sagged, and he went back to sit beside his wife who stared at her hands that lay in her lap. Mr. Draper put his elbows on his knees and leaned his face into

the palms of his hands. We continued to hold our breaths, but when the Drapers didn't move, we gathered our families and headed toward the doors, leaving them alone. Later, Silas's parents told us that Silas hung the picture of Ellen above his bed. They said it was beautiful, his best shot yet.

Weeks later, Silas arrived at Harry James's funeral, camera in hand. A couple of people tried to talk to him, to tell him how much we appreciated his being there, but he ignored us. We sat quietly while he snapped pictures, and the universe was right again.

CHAPTER XVII

MAY OURS BE AS HAPPY AS YOURS

Dad insisted we eat at Swan Song, a place my parents never went when married but where we met yearly to celebrate their divorce. The room was dark except for lights that shone on individual tables. Mom and Dad were framed in the glow of the bulb above them, smiling and staring at each other. Frank Sinatra crooned through wall-mounted speakers.

Mom looked surprised to see Stanley. I was too. I'd invited him, but I wasn't sure he'd make it. Mom blew kisses at us. She had pink circles of blush on her cheeks, and her red lipstick bled into the lines around her mouth. "I've missed you," Mom said to Stanley. "You never make it to our Sunday dinners."

"Sorry," Stanley said. "I've been working a lot of overtime."

We'd rehearsed our excuses beforehand. Stanley and I hadn't seen each other in weeks, though we'd talked over the phone a couple times. Stanley had spruced himself up since I'd moved out. His curls still stuck out in every direction, but with pressed dress pants and a nice button-down, they looked cute rather than messy. One of the reasons I'd left is because he hadn't changed a thing about himself since we got married. It was like he didn't feel the need to impress me anymore. At least until now.

"Looking good, you two," Dad said. "How's it going?"

"Great," I said. "We're really great. How about you?"

"It's a good day," Dad said, which he said every year. I never asked him if it was a good day because they were divorced or because they were together for dinner.

Dad was wearing the tie that he'd bought for his brother's funeral twenty years before, a strip of brown with bright pink ducks flying downward in a V. It was hideous. I hadn't seen it since Uncle Russell's funeral, and I never imagined he'd still have it. With their matching cowlicks and goatees, people used to think my father and his brother were twins, although Uncle Russell was ten years older. The way Dad put it, he had a career, while Russell only had jobs. Dad claimed that told us everything we needed to know about the two of them.

Instead of going on vacation, Mom, Dad, and I used to spend two weeks at Uncle Russell's house in Myrtle Beach every summer. Dad never mentioned careers and jobs when we were there, only when we returned home. We would swim in Uncle Russell's pool, make hamburgers on his grill, and play darts in his game room. Dad insisted we couldn't afford such a nice place if we'd paid for a vacation. For Mom, the centerpiece of our trip was Uncle Russell's speedboat. I didn't like how fast my uncle drove it, so Dad stayed home with me while Mom and Russell went out. Dad drank too much beer and watched me make sand castles. Mom and Russell drove the boat up and down the coast for hours every morning. When they got back, her eyes were clear, her smile wide. Dad was usually drunk by then.

"What's up with the tie, Dad?" I asked.

"Nostalgia," Dad said.

He smiled at Mom, and she looked away, into the darkness beyond the tables.

Stanley cleared his throat. “Should we order something to drink?” he asked.

I glared at him. Poor Stanley. He hadn’t even known that I was having an affair until I told him. “His name’s Charles,” I’d said. “How could you?” he asked, and before I could stop myself, I said, “Easily.” The sad thing was, cheating on him really was easy. He didn’t even seem to notice, and I wanted someone who wanted to be married to me, who acted like our marriage was an important part of his life. If he’d woken up one morning and I’d been replaced by a different woman, I’m not sure Stanley would have noticed.

“Let’s at least order drinks,” Stanley said and waved the waiter over.

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, but he was already asking the waiter about the wine selection. I wanted to ask him where this version of my husband had been all these years.

Mom still wasn’t looking at us, and Dad shifted in his seat. My parents had divorced twenty years before, and the sudden appearance of Dad’s ugly tie, which he hadn’t worn in all these years, brought the end of their marriage abruptly to the table. I was ten when Uncle Russell died of a heart attack. When we walked into the funeral home for the viewing, Mom leaned over the body, hugged Russell around his chest, and bawled, tears streaming down her face. I stood behind her with Dad. He grabbed my hand and squeezed, cutting off the circulation to my fingers. I endured the pain as long as I could, but I had to pull my hand from his. He looked at me then, took my hand more gently, and we walked out of the funeral home and sat in the car until Mom came out.

No one spoke on the drive home, eight hours without the radio and no talk of attending the burial the following day. Two weeks later, Dad packed up and moved out.

We hardly had any contact with Dad after the divorce, except the yearly dinners, where Mom dressed me in outfits covered with flowers and lace and pranced me around in front of Dad. They'd spend the whole meal fussing over me and ignoring one another, never quite looking each other in the eye. Even as a kid, I didn't trust their reasons for being so polite, but every year Mom told me that the dinners were for me, so that I would always remember how much my parents loved me. My parents weren't so awkward once I started bringing Stanley. Even when I explained that we were celebrating their divorce, Stanley acted like the dinners were a real celebration, like a wedding anniversary or a birthday party, letting all of us pretend as well.

Dad put his arm around Mom, whispered in her ear. She blushed. To look at them, no one would have guess they were divorced, that for twenty years they had only spoken at these yearly parties.

Maybe I should have stopped myself, but something made me press forward. "That tie, Dad," I said, and Mom shot me a look that I ignored. "Can we talk about it?"

"Why would you want to talk about *that*?" Mom asked, her cheeks redder than before.

"Talk about what?" Stanley asked, but I didn't look at him. I'd never told him the whole story.

"It doesn't matter now, does it?" I asked Mom. "He forgave you."

No one said anything, so I leaned toward Dad. “You did forgive her, right?” Stanley looked at me and grabbed my arm, but I shook him off. “Right?” I asked again.

“This is supposed to be a celebration, Arlene,” Mom said.

“Of what?” I asked.

“Freedom,” Dad said.

“Family,” Mom said. She glanced at Dad.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” Mom asked.

“This,” I said. Dad’s arm was around Mom’s shoulder, and she snuggled into him.

“We’re dating,” Dad said. Mom smiled, her eyes squinted into crescents. She kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re divorced,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t date,” Mom said.

I wanted to tell them that Stanley and I were divorcing too. I wanted to let them know that I’d followed in Mom’s footsteps, though not with Stanley’s brother. I had more class than that.

“Congratulations,” Stanley said. He shook my dad’s hand, squeezed my mom’s and smiled. He seemed genuinely happy for them. He waved the waiter over again and said, “A bottle of champagne.”

“Instead of the wine?” the man asked.

"Yes. We're celebrating." He looked back at my parents. "I always thought you two were perfect for each other."

Mom reached over and ran her hands up and down the tie. Dad kissed her. I looked away, realized that they'd slept with Russell between them their whole marriage.

"So, you've forgiven her for everything?" I asked Dad.

"Really, Arlene?" Stanley asked. "Can't you just be happy for them?"

"Are you getting married again?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" Dad asked.

"It does to me," I said. Ever since they split up, I'd wanted my parents back together, but now I wanted to throw something at them, yell at them. Tell them that they weren't allowed to be happy when I wasn't.

"I don't know, Arlene," Mom said. She placed her palms flat on the table. "We weren't very happy when we were married."

"No," I said. "You weren't."

Stanley's smile faltered as he looked at each of us. Mom and Dad had scooted apart, and I looked down at the table. "I love being married," Stanley said.

"You do?" I asked.

"Of course," he said.

"What do you love about marriage?" Mom asked.

"That I'll never be alone," he said.

"You can still be alone," Dad said.

"I know that now," Stanley said. I looked at him, but he held my dad's gaze.

"It's the idea of marriage, right?" Dad said. "The idea that you'll always have someone?"

"But what happens if they leave?" Stanley asked. He didn't look at me, seemed to really want my dad's answer.

"At least you had them for a while," Dad said.

Stanley nodded.

"A friend of mine got married when she was eighteen," I said. "Remember, Mom? I was her maid of honor. They got engaged on Monday, and they were married on Wednesday. We bought her dress on Tuesday. When her mom asked her why she was hurrying, she said she was that excited to spend the rest of her life with him."

"See?" Stanley said. "That's what I mean."

"Are they still married?" Mom asked.

"No," I said. "They got divorced two years later. She had his initials tattooed on the back of her neck. She said she needed to find someone else with the same initials. I don't know if she ever did."

"That's sad," Mom said.

"What about love?" Dad asked. "Did your friend really love her husband, or was she young and in lust?"

"Love's the most important part," Mom said. "A marriage is doomed without it."

"But doesn't that go away after a while?" I asked. "Don't you get so comfortable you forget you were ever in love?"

"It can," Mom said. "You have to work to make sure it doesn't."

"I never stopped loving your mother," Dad said.

I couldn't speak. Tears welled in my eyes, and I watched Mom lean toward Dad. Their foreheads met, then their noses, then they kissed. Stanley slipped his handkerchief into my hand, and I wiped the tears off my cheeks.

I missed the ease of my marriage, the fact that Stanley knew I needed a handkerchief. Charles wouldn't have. I tried to picture him beside me at these dinners, and I couldn't. He would argue that marriage was a social institution, that you only got love if you were lucky, that he wasn't the marrying kind. He wouldn't understand that these dinners were a necessary tradition. That my family didn't make sense without them. Stanley understood all too well.

The waiter arrived with the champagne, and we watched as he popped the cork and then filled each of our glasses.

"To divorce," I said, raising my glass. My family turned toward me. "May everyone have one as fruitful as yours."

Stanley looked at my parents. "To divorce," he said. "May ours be as happy as yours."

We clinked glasses. I tilted my head back and swallowed every drop.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOUSE OF TIRES

It was early, four in the morning, and Ned was in the garage when the Subaru jumped the curb and crashed through the plate glass window, overturning piles of tires that were balanced for visual effect. By the time the car stopped, it was all the way inside the showroom. A man stumbled out of the car, a knot already rising on his forehead where his head had hit the windshield, a red mark from the steering wheel across his neck. It would bruise later. “Oh, shit,” he said to Ned, slurring his words. “I can’t get another DUI.”

Ned looked at the car in the middle of his showroom and the skid marks across the floor, and saw an opportunity. “You could go,” he said to the man.

“What?”

“Go. Sober up. I won’t call the cops, and you’ll pay for the window and sign the car over to me.”

The car was a bucket of bolts, held together with duct tape and dumb luck. It was fifteen years old if it was a day, and if the floorboards weren’t already rusted through, they would be soon. But Ned didn’t plan to drive it. House of Tires was new then, and he needed the publicity. Otherwise, he’d spend the rest of his life coming to work at three in the morning and falling into bed at midnight, never making a cent off the place.

Ned had opened the garage the year before, on his fortieth birthday, a present from his wife. He was tired of always working for someone else, and he’d dreamed of

owning his own place. But business wasn't booming, and he and Lois were in a tight spot.

"Deal," the guy said, and they shook hands. Before he left, Ned took his license, a guarantee that he'd return with the title later in the day.

And he did, along with someone who gave Ned an estimate on the cost of replacing the showcase window. The man paid the bill in cash, and Ned never saw him again.

Ned swept up the shards of glass, restacked the tires, and put a sign on the car that said, "Need brakes? Ned's House of Tires has you covered!" Then he had the window replaced, the Subaru still inside his shop. People stopped by for the next week to see the car that had plowed through the front of the store. While they were there, they went ahead and had their brakes checked and their tires rotated. Even the police stopped by, but they weren't going to write up a complaint if Ned didn't want them to. Besides, they said, Ned could have driven the car in himself and pretended someone else had. They had no proof a crime had been committed.

From that day on, House of Tires was the place to go for your vehicle's needs in Brickton, West Virginia. People stopped by to see the smashed up car, but they quickly realized that Ned's work was good and fairly priced. That one accident had allowed Ned to stop pulling such long hours, to hire another mechanic and someone to help run the business end of the store. For the first year of the garage's life, he and Lois had been burning the candle at both ends, even taking a second mortgage on their house. With the

rusty Subaru as a showpiece, they were able to take a breather and enjoy themselves a little.

Ned and Lois didn't have kids and didn't want any. They didn't spend summers at the beach either. But they liked cars, and House of Tires was supposed to afford them a nice place to work and then a good retirement. Lois dreamed of spending their old age restoring classic cars. She wanted to start with a '51 Packard, then move on to a '71 Barracuda. If their garage was a success, they planned to spend their winters restoring cars and their summers driving them on mountain roads.

Over the next decade, House of Tires grew to have ten mechanics, plus a full-time office manager. Ned and Lois worked only when they wanted to, or when the garage was backed up around holidays or in the summer. They'd added an addition to the garage and a large waiting area for all their customers. Ned hung a big screen TV on the wall and kept a pot of coffee going. He didn't use the cheap stuff either – no, he bought a big can of Maxwell House and dumped the pot if it got old before someone finished it. His coffee was fresh, and the waiting area even had a play structure for kids, like the kind they had in fast food restaurants. The profits allowed Lois to start shopping for a Packard earlier than she'd expected. She hadn't found the car's body yet, but she'd already bought the parts she knew she'd need: original paint in Corona Cream, door handles from a heap she'd found in a dump, as well as any other odds and ends she could find.

But the accident had happened years ago, and recently a national chain had moved to town, replacing House of Tires as the place to go. Ned still had his most loyal

customers, those who'd been coming to him for years, but the prices were slightly lower at the other place, and everyone else had jumped ship to save a few pennies.

"It's not fair," he told Lois. "We're home-grown. A chain doesn't care about this town."

They stood inside their showroom. It was late at night. Earlier that evening, their office manager had told them what they already knew: they were losing money faster than they were making it. Some of the mechanics' hours had to be cut. Ned had already laid off two of them, young guys who'd be able to get jobs easily. He worried about the older men though, the ones who'd been with him since the beginning. They depended on House of Tires just as much as he and Lois did.

Ned and Lois could afford to let the place go under and live a quiet retirement if they had to, but they'd never planned on living month to month in their old age, relying on the cars they already owned. Their retirement plan was full of classic cars and traveling to car shows. And for that version of their life, they needed to sell a booming garage, not shut down a place that was no longer needed.

"I can go back to work," Ned said. "It's been a few years since I've been under a car, but I can do it."

"It won't come to that," Lois said. "Something has to give."

First, they took out ads in the paper and offered coupons. The discounts cut their profit to almost nothing, but Ned figured if they could just get their customers back, they'd find a way to make up the difference. Maybe they could drive the other place out of business, then raise their prices again. They hosted a cookout with hamburgers and

soda. School kids held fundraisers in the lot, washing cars to fund their teams. They even hired the local country station to broadcast live while Ned announced offers.

But nothing worked.

"We need to go bigger," he told Lois. "We need a gimmick, something to get people from outside of Brickton to come here."

Ned started by calling the Gazette about a feature, a special interest piece on the old Subaru. He also called a local TV station about filming a commercial but didn't tell Lois. She'd been nervous about the cost. "If we put too much in," she'd said, "we'll never retire." Which Ned understood. With no end in sight, there would be no Packard, no Barracuda. But they wouldn't make money if they didn't spend any. At least that's what he'd always been told, and it had worked when they first opened. Of course, they'd been younger then, but if they didn't try, House of Tires would have to close its doors.

The newspaper photographer came to the garage before it opened so she could see the place without any customers. She was a kid, straight out of college, sipping coffee as she circled the old Subaru, looking for the perfect angle, the right amount of sunlight as it peeked over the hills and shone straight into the showroom. She backed up and told Ned to scoot closer to the bumper. "This is perfect," she said. "The sun's reflecting off the fender, and you're lit from below. Cross your arms over your chest. Don't move."

She pulled out a camera and started snapping pictures, each from a slightly different angle. Ned wished Lois were there, but she'd bowed out, said people trusted

men more than women with their cars. “But they love family businesses,” Ned replied. She hadn’t been swayed, said she’d rather sleep in.

The girl knelt down, moved closer to the car and pointed the camera upward, and Ned wondered if he should have trimmed his nose hair. Then she was backlit by headlights as a car careened across the parking lot, straight at the store. The car crashed through the showroom window and smashed into the Subaru. The photographer screamed, caught between the two cars. The Subaru jolted forward and slammed into Ned. He fell backward onto the floor, his knee bent at the wrong angle.

The new vehicle was a Toyota that had been sitting in the lot waiting for its owner to come get it. But the person who jumped out wasn’t the owner – it was Lois. She was already crying and moving toward him.

“Oh my god,” Ned said.

Lois reached up and touched her brow, where a large bruise was already forming.

“What the hell?” he asked.

Lois looked past him, to where the photographer was still pinned between the cars.

“Help me,” the girl moaned. Lois didn’t seem to notice.

“You have to go,” Ned said.

“What?” Lois said. Her eyes didn’t look focused.

“Go,” Ned repeated.

Sirens sounded in the distance. It was early still, not quite seven, but Brickton was coming to life, and people nearby had heard the bursting of the glass, the crunch of

metal on metal. Lois looked away and then back at him. “Go,” he said. “Get out of here.”

And she did. She ran through the store and the garage.

“It’s okay, Inez,” he called to the photographer, who had stopped moaning. “Help’s on the way.”

“Could you describe her?” the officer asked.

He sat on a chair beside Ned’s hospital bed, and he’d already been there for thirty minutes. Ned tried to focus, but the pain medicine they’d given him for his leg made his thoughts swim. He felt like all the bones in his leg had shattered, though the doctor said it was only his knee.

“What?” he asked.

“The woman,” the officer repeated. “Describe her.”

“She’s white, in her fifties, has brown hair.” He stopped. He was describing Lois. “She smelled like she’d been drinking. And hadn’t bathed. Maybe she was on drugs.” He closed his eyes. The room was beginning to spin.

“Are you okay?” the officer asked.

“No,” Ned said. “I don’t think I am. Can we do this later?”

“Just a few more questions,” the officer said.

Lois ran through the door then, a bandage plastered to her forehead. “Ned,” she said and ran to his bed, hugging him. “Are you okay?” she asked. “I came as soon as I heard.”

Ned didn't want her to touch him, had already realized what he'd done, felt sick with guilt. He couldn't stand to look at his wife as she fawned over him before turning to the officer. But he let her perch on the edge of his bed and put her arm around him.

"I slipped in the shower," she said, touching her forehead. "Hit my head on the faucet. Almost blacked out."

"The windshield of the car was cracked," the officer said.

"From what?" Lois asked. If he hadn't been there this morning, Ned could believe Lois had no idea what the man was talking about.

"Whoever drove the car hit their head."

"Is there DNA?" Lois asked. "You could find out who did it."

"Probably not," the officer said. "No blood." He seemed almost convinced by Lois's performance.

"Is the girl okay?" Lois asked.

"Inez," Ned said.

"What?" Lois asked.

"Her name is Inez," Ned said.

Lois nodded.

"She will be," the officer said. "It'll be a long recovery for her though."

"Have you talked to her yet? Maybe she knows something," Lois said.

"She doesn't remember a thing," the officer said. "Shock. Of course, it might come back later."

"We can only hope," Lois said. She turned to Ned. "We need to do something for her. We'll send her flowers, have a fundraiser, something."

He nodded, felt almost sick at what a good actress his wife was. At least he hoped she was acting.

"Are we done now?" Ned asked. "Can we finish this later? I really need to rest."

The officer nodded, said, "I'll stop by again."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Lois moved from his bed to a chair and put both hands over her mouth. She rocked forward and backward while breathing deeply. "Oh God oh God," she repeated. Ned was relieved. He needed to believe his wife was still human.

"You should stick around until the police leave," he said. "Then go home. The nurse said they'll release me in the morning. You can come back then."

"We need to talk about this," Lois said. She leaned forward in her seat. "You were supposed to be—"

Ned held up his hand. "Not here," he said. "We'll talk at home."

Lois nodded and turned away from him. Ned knew she was upset, but he didn't really care. He felt sick. With her and with himself.

A few days later, Ned was stuck at home in bed, a cast from ankle to ass. That's why, when Lois said, "We have to talk," he had to listen.

"You were supposed to be in the garage," she said. "You were supposed to take pictures of cars on the racks. Not the Subaru."

“What are you talking about? The Subaru was the whole plan.” His voice rose as he spoke. There was no way he’d take the blame on this one. “She was taking pictures of the old wreck, the only thing we have that’s worth a newspaper article.”

“No,” she said. “You were supposed to start in the back, show her what a great garage we have, and work your way toward the front. That’s what you said.”

“You planned everything based on that?” he asked. “Didn’t you even think about what could go wrong?”

“What was I supposed to do?” she asked. “You were sitting in the garage all day waiting for customers who never came. And when you got home, you were a little sadder every day. I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know how to make it better.”

“It wasn’t your job to make it better.”

“Yes, it was,” she said. They were both yelling now. She stood at the foot of the bed, pointing at him. “You sure as hell weren’t doing anything.”

“I brought the reporter.”

“Whoopdee shit,” she said. “One newspaper article, and everyone would flock back? I don’t think so.”

“And crashing into the store would fix everything.”

“I was recreating the original accident,” she said. “It was going to be beautiful. You and the reporter would already be there. She’d get great shots, and it would make the front page. If people stopped by to see one car crashed into a store, they’d surely stop by to see two.” She was pleading now. She sat on the edge of the bed and reached toward him. “Don’t you get it?”

"No," he said. "I don't."

Lois was Ned's rock, always had been. Tough as nails. Topping out at five feet, a skinny thing with ropy muscles, she could take a car's engine apart and put it back together again without blinking twice. They'd met at a car show, both admiring a restored '53 Bel Air that was up for auction. "The upholstery isn't original," Lois had said, "but they got the Regatta Blue paint right."

"Any chance you'd want to go to dinner?" Ned had asked.

Now, he didn't even know who she was. She sighed and pulled away. "We're not going to agree," she said. "But it's happened. There's nothing we can do."

"What happens when they figure out you were driving?"

"How are they going to do that?"

He pointed at her bandage. "That looks pretty fishy."

"Maybe," she said. "But how are they going to prove it? They won't. Especially when we throw a fundraiser for that girl and pay all her medical bills."

"What about Inez?" Ned asked. "What about when her memory comes back?"

"What if it doesn't?"

"But what if it does?"

"We'll say she's confused," Lois said. "It's my word against hers. And if you go along with me, it'll be two against one. You will, right?"

"Of course," Ned said and sighed. "I can't lose you now."

"You won't," Lois said. "I promise."

"We could leave," Ned said. "We can close the garage for good and leave. Just go away."

"No," Lois said. "We've already had people calling the house about coming in for oil changes or new tires. The town's rallied around us."

"But what if we get caught?"

"What if we don't?" Lois asked. "What if it didn't happen the way it was supposed to, but it worked anyway?"

"That's sick," Ned said. "We can't profit off of what you did."

"What *we* did," Lois said.

"I didn't do anything."

"You lied. That's enough as far as the law's concerned."

She was right. Ned wouldn't change it either. There was a reason he'd fallen in love with Lois, and he still loved her.

"We'll pay for every cent of the girl's medical bills. We'll make sure she gets whatever she needs," Lois said.

"And any physical therapy."

"Of course," Lois said. "Anything she needs, we'll cover it."

"We'll donate all the garage's profits for the next two weeks to her."

"We'll fix her car for free for the rest of her life."

"We can make this right," Ned said. He reached for Lois's hand.

"All of it," Lois said. "It'll be just like it used to be."

"Yes," Ned said. "Yes, it will."

CHAPTER XIX

SUMMARY

Images of the hillbilly continue to appear in reality television, music videos, films, and even internet memes. This proliferation of the hillbilly stereotype does not allow for the rich diversity of cultures that exists in Appalachia, either erasing these other populations altogether or disallowing their existence. While it is unlikely that stereotypes about Appalachia will ever disappear altogether, literature offers one way to reappropriate and undermine images of the stock hillbilly or other denigrating images that proliferate about the place. The preceding pages offer an understanding of how Breece D'J Pancake and Scott McClanahan have confronted these stereotypes, as well as my own attempts to show a more diverse Appalachia.

The varied history of the hillbilly archetype offers one way to approach the changing face of Appalachian stereotypes and, ultimately, to undermine them. Examining how the hillbilly's image and meaning has changed – and continues to change – offers a way to subvert the simplicity of this stereotype that has come to stand in for the entire population of Appalachia. If the stereotype reduces "people to a few, simple essential characteristics which are represented as fixed by nature," the changing image of the hillbilly cannot exist within this definition (Hall 257). The hillbilly continues to transform as it is needed to stand in for different concerns within American culture, undermining the essentialist nature the stereotype implies. These different faces of the hillbilly offer a way to undermine the simplistic nature of the archetype, inviting

different representations of this figure, which can ultimately undermine the figure altogether.

The stereotype's moment of instability is where Appalachian literature steps in, offering different representations of this figure as a way to further undermine the belief that Appalachia contains a homogenous population. In his stories, Breece D'J Pancake complicates the hillbilly stereotype by populating his stories with a rich cast of characters who, if simplified, could all fall into the hillbilly stereotype, as they are all poor, white, rural, working class. Still, Pancake's characterization of these people is so complex that it is difficult to reduce them to mere stereotype. Instead, his characters portray a rich population that embodies much more than the basic tropes of the hillbilly archetype. Scott McClanahan uses a different method to undermine the hillbilly stereotype in his work, arguing that while there may be some truth in the hillbilly stereotype, there is a reason for this – industrial exploitation. *Crapalachia* examines how the coal industry's long history of corruption has created the population that currently exists within Appalachia.

My own stories use both of these methods – complex characterization and arguing against industrial exploitation – to show a more diverse Appalachian population. Unlike the work of Pancake and McClanahan, my stories also portray populations beyond the poor, white, rural, working class as existing in the region. By writing stories that offer a population that lives within Appalachia but outside of the narrow boundaries that the hillbilly stereotype allows, I have continued to undermine homogenous portrayals of the region's population.

Though literature is not the only medium through which Appalachian stereotypes can be undermined, it is the one area where the population of the region is often represented as being heterogeneous. If, as Douglas Reichert Powell argues, each portrayal of the region helps to undermine simplistic representations of place, then literature plays an important role in helping to reshape Appalachia as a place with many cultures and diverse populations.

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